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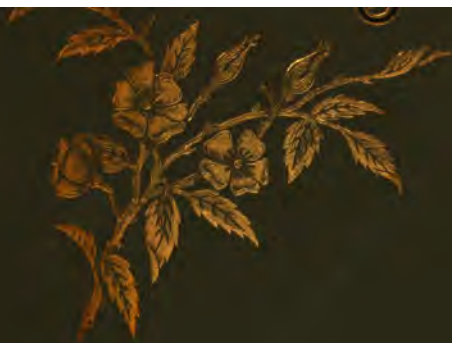
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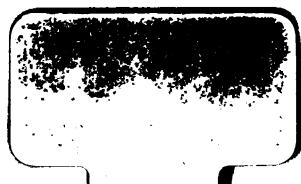
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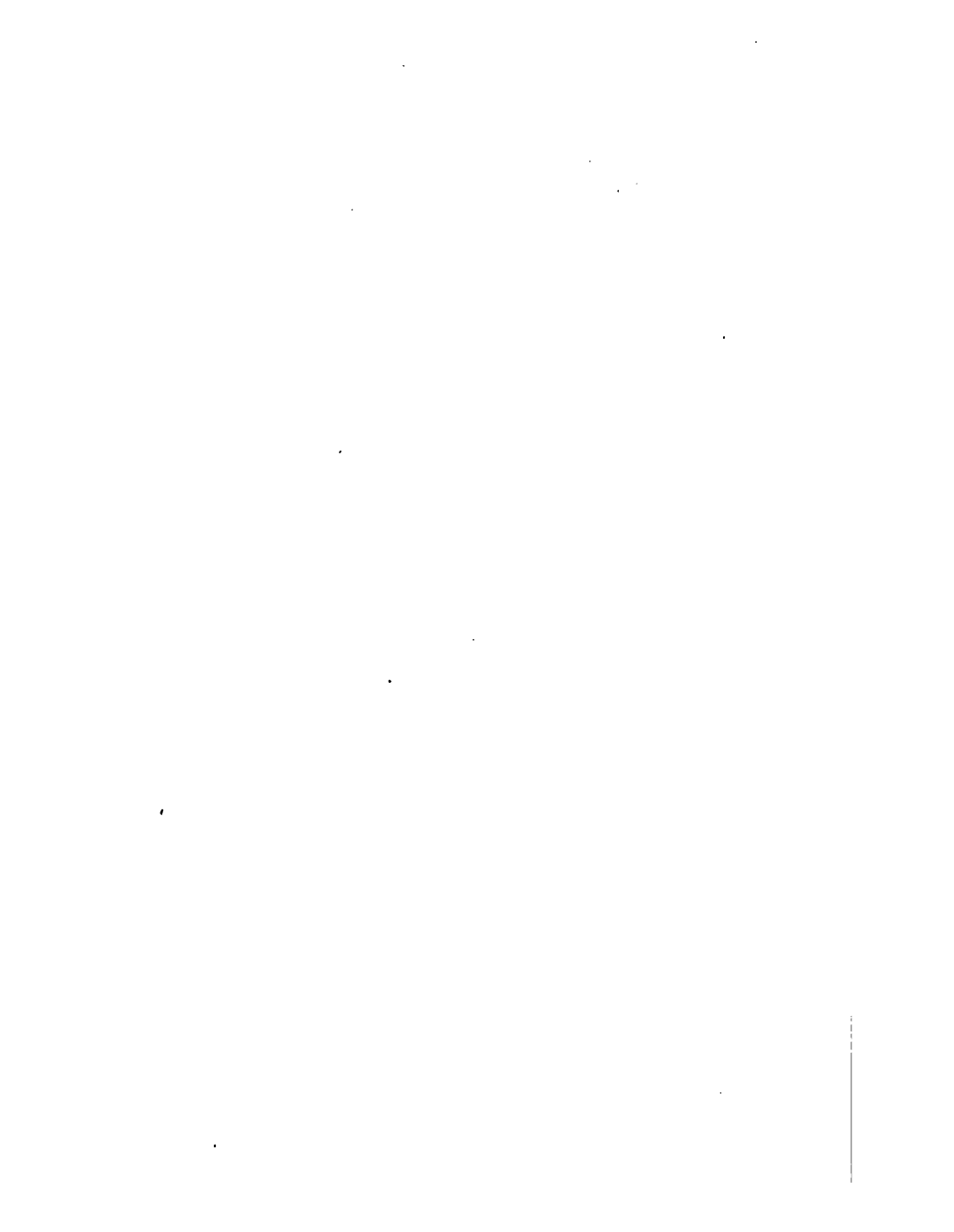
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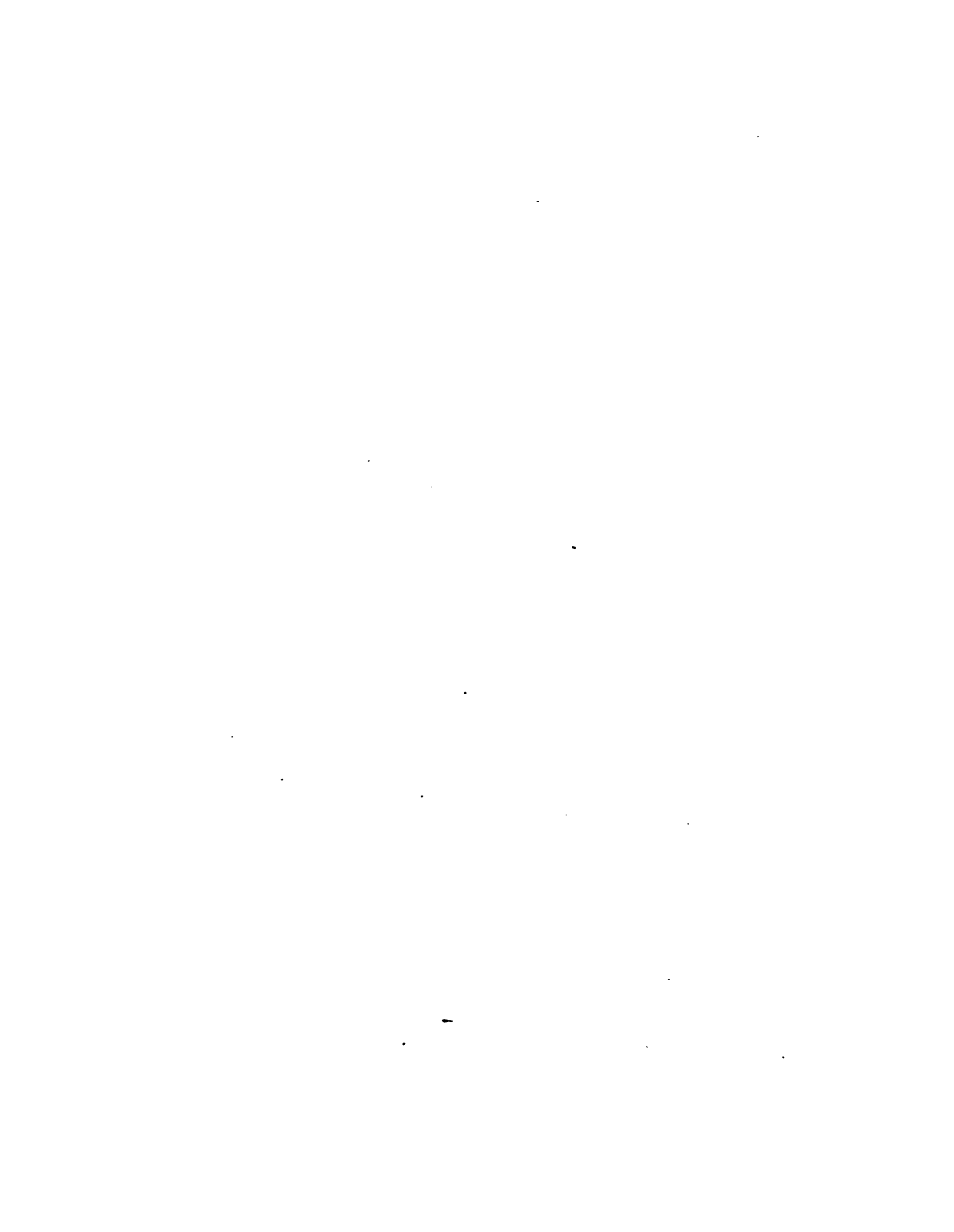


MRS ROBERT O'REILLY.



THE RED HOUSE IN THE
SUBURBS





Frontispiece.



“ ‘From the shop?’ she said, interrogatively.”

Page 79.

THE
RED HOUSE IN THE SUBURBS
A STORY

BY
MRS. ROBERT O'REILLY
AUTHOR OF "SUSSEX STORIES," "REED FARM," ETC.

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CHAPTER I.

THE "YELLOW TRAM."

IN one of those apparently interminable thoroughfares along which London does really seem to be going out of town at last, and where, owing to the attempts at gardens before every door, the great city may be said to have dressed itself in green, in preparation for the country it is after all fated never to reach,—for it loses itself by-and-by in a wilderness of brick and mortar and is town still,—there stood a red brick house that had something in its look different from the other houses near. The colour, perhaps, of the brick catching the eye at once, in contrast with the modern stucco dull grey tint or painted frontage of most of the other houses, may have given it this different aspect ; or it may have been owing to the Virginia creeper trained round the lower windows, and just beginning to put forth its first leaves that spring, or to the yellow and purple crocuses

springing up in the miniature grass-plot, or owing still more to a trifling peculiarity in its situation.

The long straight road, with the iron rails of the tramway lying upon it for all its length, and seeming to mark emphatically *how* long and *how* straight it was, was bordered on either side by buildings that were monotonously all alike, excepting here and there where the dead uniformity was broken by the wall and the jealously barred gate of some mansion more pretentious than the rest, or by one or two shops close together, or by the gaudily painted sign of the inevitable public-house at nearly every corner. But, beyond a railway bridge that left the ground beneath it in deep shadow, and damp always as well as dark, a spot where the black mud was blacker than elsewhere, and the smell of the river lingered, and the river fog seemed to cling all the year round, beyond this archway the houses drew back as it were, so that the tiny square of garden before the red house was sheltered on one side by the blank wall of an artist's colour shop, by exactly the depth of which the road had suddenly become wider, and kept the added width almost as far as the eye could reach. This standing back, this sheltering wall, gave to the red house the appearance of nestling in a sunny corner from whence it looked out with a friendly glance upon the world in general.

Anyone who was fanciful enough to believe that, in some way hard to be defined, but not the less recognisable because of that, the spirit of those by whom they are inhabited impresses itself upon the places in which people

live, would have felt sure at once that the dwellers in the red house far from standing selfishly apart in their quiet nook, looked with the same friendly glance that the house itself seemed to wear upon the troubled world outside their door, and would have fain lessened the trouble in it if they could—*did* lessen all of it their hands could reach.

At intervals all day long, and for the matter of that nearly all night long as well, so late did they leave off, and at so early an hour in the morning did they begin again, the tramway cars went up and down the road, but on this cold spring day when chilly sunshine alternated with sharp showers of sleet, and a cutting wind blew through sun and sleet alike, the cars, which by all rules in bad weather ought to be doing a good business, were doing hardly any—none at all, the conductor of the "yellow tram" muttered to himself as he stepped inside to avoid a pelting shower, and sitting down near the door began to look over the book of checks he carried in his hand.

The car was stationary just then. With its mingled discords of jangling bells, beat of horses' hoofs upon the stones, grinding of iron wheels on iron rails, it had reached the end of the long road, and was waiting to start upon the return journey until another car came up along another line. As yet it had not a single passenger, but as the young conductor bent frowning over the book he appeared to be studying, a voice in his ear asked suddenly,

"Is this—this thing a tramway car?"

A man had mounted the stage before the door, and stood there looking at the car itself, and at the street outside, as though vehicle and place were alike strange to him,—a man with a bronzed face, and hair which, though quite grey, covered his head thickly,—a man who, to look at him, might be almost any age and of almost any calling.

“Is this a tramway car?” he repeated.

“For those who find life long enough to say all that, it is; most folks call it a tram,” said the conductor, merely glancing up for a moment, and devoting his attention to his book again at once.

“You’re a queer fellow: when do we start?”

Another careless glance, this time with an expression that seemed to ask whether, candidly now, the questioner thought it worth while to start, or put horses to and run “trams” at all for him alone; but beyond this glance the conductor made no other answer, his attention being at that moment caught by the sight of a young man carrying a blue bag and hurrying along the pavement.

“Here you are!” cried the conductor, advancing to the stage.

The young man laughed as he called back in reply,

“Just so; there you are,” and went still more rapidly on his way through the drifting shower and the piercing wind.

“He’ll get there no sooner in the end,” said the conductor moodily.

“We shall overtake him, I suppose?” said the passenger.

"Yes ; and he'll reach the end of his journey no quicker than if he had waited with us here ; but that's his way—he must be moving always, must be going on."

"Not a bad way."

"Better than waiting, you think ? I've had enough of waiting in my time—it wears the heart out of a man. This standing still after the run up or down reminds me of it always ;" he blew upon his chilled fingers, and looked round impatiently to see if another passenger was in sight.

"This—this *tram*, is it full in general ?"

"Too full on warm summer days when we pass people on the road and can't stop to take them up ; too full often at night when folks are going home ; full in wet weather mostly, but empty enough at times," with a look at the red-cushioned seats vacant altogether at that moment, for his sole passenger was standing in the doorway by his side.

"You carry all kinds of people, I dare say ?"

"All kinds ; regular passengers whose faces one gets to know, they pass up and down so constantly ; more are strangers, seen once and never seen again ; so many of them ! where on earth do you suppose they come from, and where on earth is it they all go to ?"

He put the question with so much abruptness, and so much as though expecting a satisfactory answer to it, that the other seemed to think him a queerer fellow than he had thought before.

"Bless my soul ! how should I know ?" he said,

turning in to the car and seating himself close to the entrance.

"They come and go from all parts," the conductor went on; "we carry business men, merchants home from the East, foreigners of all sorts; I don't think I should be mistaken if I said *you* were a stranger in England?"

"I am no foreigner—a cosmopolitan if you like."

Perhaps he thought the reply would be unintelligible; if so, he was mistaken,—a curious smile passed over the features of the younger man.

"I was only thinking of the colonies," he said. "I don't doubt you're a British subject, and we all know there are few such cosmopolitans as may be found amongst— All right, ma'am, here you are."

It was true the new comer was there. She had stepped up unobserved, and now, giving the conductor a quiet smile as he stood aside to let her pass, seated herself near the door. A pale, rather sad-faced woman, with soft grey eyes that seemed to have shed many tears, and had an earnest look in them as though seeking always for sorrows her own sorrow might help her to understand and comfort. A woman whose age might have been as hard to guess correctly as that of the fellow passenger sitting opposite to her, but who in point of fact had scarcely yet reached middle age, being at the most but a year or two over thirty. She and the conductor appeared to know each other; possibly this was one of the regular passengers he had spoken of. Towards her he

dropped a little of the off-hand manner that had struck the grey-haired man with some surprise, and adopted one more like other men of his class and calling. In another moment the car they were waiting for came up. There were no passengers by it for the yellow tram, however. One or two people alighted and hurried on their several ways. The sun was shining again, and the keen wind blowing; with a great strain the patient horses started the heavy vehicle, which, after the first start, ran easily enough, and the conductor tore two tickets from his book; it was before the days of the "alarm punch," tramways were in their infancy as yet.

"Threepence is it?" asked the man with grey hair.

"Yes, carriage, horses, coachman, and flunkey—if you take me for that last—into the bargain, all for threepence; the omnibuses don't beat us yet. The place seems strange to you," he added, for the man he addressed was gazing with rather a bewildered air from the windows, first on one side, then on the other.

"I have been away from England long enough and far enough to have seen strange sights," he answered, "but it is odd that changes at home strike me as more strange, and harder to believe in or to realize, than any sight, however wonderful, elsewhere. This was all green fields when I was a boy."

"That's an old tale; so many say the same; so many 'babble o' green fields,'" the conductor said carelessly.

The other looked at him sharply.

"You were not brought up to your present way of life?" he said.

Still keeping a look-out for any passer-by who might chance to hail the car, the look-out he never forgot or neglected for a moment, the conductor begged to be told how it was possible he should have been brought up to it.

"It's true that when I was a boy there were no fields here, but there were no trams either," he said laughing.

"And the tramway—for a student of human nature now, I daresay it is as good a way as any other of seeing life," the elder man went on.

"Then it's a good way of seeing a precious bad thing!"

"You're young; you cannot have seen enough of life to judge."

"Men sometimes judge of the whole by a sample, don't they? The sample I've seen——" he broke off abruptly in his speech, the woman in the corner seat moved slightly, and looked as though she would have spoken, but the conversation had dropped, the grey-haired man continued to gaze in silence from the windows, and the conductor to stand equally silent, and on the look-out still. Occasionally a man would swing himself up upon the car without checking its progress, and climb to the roof, but no one else took a seat upon the cushioned benches within, until the young man with the blue bag in his hand hailed the yellow tram at last, and entered laughing.

"I'm all this much further on my way," he cried.

"Not a step further than you would have been by now if you had waited to start with us ; I don't see what you've gained," the conductor said, as he gave the signal to go on.

"Gained? Why, a few minutes more of fresh air and quick motion, a gleam or two of sunshine, a dash of fresh, cold rain in my face. If I like these things, why not have as much of them as I can? It is a glorious day, a spring day, all smiles and tears."

"That's as you take it—free to go your own pace and your own way, it may be all you say it is ; obliged to stand here, it's a numbing day, a day of raw, cold, bitter weather."

"It is, it is ! a day of east wind and mocking sun ; a true English day ; and this long dismal row of dismal houses,—where would you see that, or anything like it, but in England ? It's depressing to the spirits, very. Houses, nothing but houses—no space—no room to breathe !" exclaimed the elder passenger with so much vehemence that the quiet woman smiled, and both the young men laughed out loud.

"There are people—nothing but people—if you come to think of it, you know, and people must have houses," said the man with the blue bag.

"Not a bit of it ! They must have homes, you mean ; do any of those,—those chests of drawers, those divisions in one huge barracks of a place,—do any of those look

like *homes* I ask you? It's a queer crop to have sprung up on the land hereabouts, as I once knew it."

"A goodly harvest for the seed sown; building land is a tolerably safe investment now-a-days. But see there, Alf, do the company allow you to carry passengers for nothing?" He pointed as he spoke to the figure of a boy, standing at the very edge of the stage before the entrance of the car, and holding on with one hand as though to steady himself for the jump off again so soon as the conductor should turn his head and become aware of the intrusion. A street boy, with a roguish, merry look, and a pair of sharp eyes scanning the conductor's face to see whether it were safe to stay a moment where he was or best to jump off at once. Rain was falling again; the gleams of sunshine that day were few and far between; the boy's clothes, ragged, and queerly patched where they were patched at all, were wet; his teeth chattered.

"I've known you do this before," the conductor said; "you don't try it on with the other cars, what do you mean by trying it on here? Come, be off with you."

"Lor, you don't mean it? You ain't got but one or two inside to-day; they wouldn't see me, not if you was to say nothing; and if a swell comes along I'll drop down quick enough, be sure of that;" the boy spoke rapidly, one foot swinging in the air, ready to drop down quickly then and there, but still trying to read in the conductor's face whether it might not be safe to stay a little longer where he was

"It's cold, bitter cold, and wet too," he said.

"Pay the fare, then, if you care to ride."

The boy gave a long, low whistle.

"Pay the fare! I ain't found no gold mine yet, nor come sudden into no fortin', nor got took on at good wages nowheres. Threepence! Oh, my eye!"

He seemed to have as great an admiration for the sum he named as the conductor himself had shown a little time before, but to look upon it from a quite different point of view. When the woman, leaning forward from the corner where she sat, said gently, "Let him stay," and counted a few half-pence into the conductor's hand, the boy's eyes followed the coins with a wistful glance, as though he could have found some other and better use for them had the choice been offered him, but, rightly interpreting the expression in his restless eyes, it was a small silver piece the woman dropped into the dirty hand so greedily outstretched to meet it.

"You get imposed upon, ma'am; he has been 'took on,' as he calls it, somewhere or other, or he'd not be carrying parcels," observed the conductor, touching with his foot a heavy package carefully done up in stout sackcloth, which the boy—having instantly and as though it were something good to eat, and that was its proper destination, placed in his mouth the sixpence given him—now proceeded to deposit upon the stage, and to deposit himself beside it, his feet just clearing the ground as they swung above it.

"I'm to have fourpence for carryin' of it, and it's

nothing but a chance job, and Jim's bad : I want to get home quick, I do," he exclaimed.

"Do you know that fellow, Alf? he seems a sharp lad," asked the young man from within the car.

"I know him, and he is that. What then? Do you want to give another a shove up and a helping hand—to start another in this weary race?"

There was a touch of bitterness in the tone, and it was that, more than the words his friend answered (for friends they surely were the observant passenger had quite made up his mind).

"It was the best I could do: there was no other opening anywhere that I could see," he said.

"I know it: I'm not ungrateful either; don't let the old lady fancy that I am."

"But you are tired of the life already?"

'It leads to nothing—that's where it is; it leads to nothing."

"Never heard of a path that led there!" interposed the grey-haired man; "why every path leads somewhere, up or down; and the paths along which we hold out a hand to help a fellow-traveller on the way, are more sure than any other to lead up at last. That's my experience, and I'm older than you two—you two boys."

The interest this stranger showed in the chance words he had heard pass between the "boys," as he was pleased to call them, was differently acknowledged by them. The young conductor looked at his passenger curiously for a moment, wondered for a moment who and what he

was, and with a careless shrug of the shoulders turned once more to his business, though indeed he never can be said to have neglected that, or ceased from the careful look-out he kept. His friend turned with a more respectful attention towards the elder man.

"You are surely right, sir," he said, and the two fell into talk together.

Meantime the sad-faced woman bending forward once again asked the boy where home was, the home he wished to reach so quickly, and whether "Jim"—whoever Jim might be—was very bad, and who took care of him.

Of all these kind questions the boy replied to only one. Pointing towards the wide, dark, railway bridge, he said that home was "over yonder," and then began to whistle to himself and watch with much apparent interest how near his feet, in shoes sadly full of holes, were to the ground, as the car crushed and jangled its way along the rails. They were nearing the archway now, but before they reached it the yellow tram was destined to stop in good earnest to take up a passenger who signalled it with an authoritative gesture that the driver saw as soon as did the conductor, and forthwith brought his grey horses to a standstill.

It did not at first sight seem a very important personage, this child who stepped daintily and without hurry across the wet street, and mounted with deliberation the low stage across which the boy shuffled hastily to be out of her way, and dropped his feet over the opposite edge

instead; not an important personage, only a little girl, some unobservant people might have said, but there was great dignity in the way in which she rejected the conductor's proffered aid, and carrying a well-filled basket on her arm, seemed to intend walking up the entire length of the car and seating herself as far from her fellow-passengers as circumstances permitted. The motion of the yellow tram was not, however, conducive to much dignity, or to any dignity at all. It started, the young lady staggered, fell up against the grey-haired man, recovered herself instantly, and subsided rather suddenly into a place beside the woman occupying the corner seat. Once there this young person contrived to look as intensely dignified as when she had first hailed the tram. If her frocks were short, and if she was obliged to sit very forward upon the seat in order to plant her two feet firmly on the floor, why she sat only the more upright for that, and looked only the more dignified because of it. After the one explanation of "Steady now, my dear!" from the grey-haired man when she involuntarily threw herself into his arms, and after the young man had politely offered to relieve her of her basket and place it on the bench, and she had as politely declined the offer, no one presumed to address any further remark to this young lady who appeared so capable of managing for herself, until the conductor stepped in and begged to know whether she was going all the way. She had the fare ready in her hand, and gave it him, and tore up the paper check as though accustomed to going by the tram-

way, and accustomed to be never at a loss whatever she might go by.

"Where do you wish to stop, miss?" the conductor said.

"Stop where there are 'lodgings' in the window." The clear, decided, childish voice attracted the attention of all the child's fellow-travellers at once.

"Lodgings for a canary? Who but a bird lodges in a window pane?" said the young man softly.

"There are many houses all along the road with bills of lodgings to let, in the windows; you had better tell me yourself, miss, when you wish to be set down."

"Yes; I will tell you," gravely, and holding her head very high, not turning it once in the direction of that impertinent young man who had spoken of canary birds, ignoring completely everyone in the yellow tram beside her own small self; so small a self, so innocent and childlike a self, that, though she did not know it, the sight of her predisposed them all to help her if she needed help, and to wonder what even so capable a little woman as she appeared could be doing lodging-hunting all alone.

After a minute or two the woman near whom she sat touched her softly on the arm and pointed to a house with the usual notice of rooms to let. The child shook her head; the house was on the sunless side of the street.

"We must have a southern aspect; that means sun, doesn't it? It is beyond the bridge that I want to

stop. I saw a notice there as I went by this morning early."

They were near to the bridge now, but before they reached it, or came in sight of the red house, the conductor giving a questioning look over his shoulder at his female passenger, put his hand to the check string and, at an answering nod from her, pulled it. The sharp click of the signal bell was heard, the yellow tram stood still, and the woman got up to go, but instead of passing quickly out, hesitated, looked for an instant wistfully at the child, and then by an impulse for which she would have found it hard to account, spoke in a low hurried voice,

"If you don't find what you want, we have a room to spare. It is the red brick house you will pass in another moment, a few doors off only, and my name is Blake, Sybilla Blake."

The child stared in seeming surprise, but made no reply; the grey-haired man, who had listened to so much that was no affair of his, and listened to it with so much apparent interest, missed those last words of the woman; he was talking fast and eagerly to the young man with the blue bag; they neither of them heard what the woman said.

"Now then, ma'am," said the condutor impatiently.

Almost before the woman's foot had left the stage the car started again. She watched it as she hurried from the corner where it always was her habit to be set down, watched the intent face of the child who had taken her



**"She saw the car engulfed as it were in the black darkness of the
railway arch."**

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seat near the door, saw the car engulfed as it were in the black darkness of the railway arch, saw the boy drop off just at that spot and shuffle into darkness by himself, and wondered vaguely whether his home could be there, or near there, and if so, what sort of home it was in which "Jim" lay "bad;" and blamed herself for having won no answers to her questions, for having lost all clue to the boy who seemed as though he might need help of some sort. And then, while she watched, a blinding sheet of mingled hail and rain dashed down and hid like a veil the black archway of the bridge, hid the yellow tram altogether from her eyes, and hastening up to the friendly door of the Red House she fitted her latch key into the lock, and entered.



CHAPTER II.

DORIS.

“**B**UT the youngest sister had to sit at home and darn stockings.”
“You ridiculous child! you are not darning either.”

“No; I am sweeping up the hearth. Still the moral is the same. It is I who sit at home and you who have all the adventures.”

“There are no adventures to have in our quiet life. Child, you have not been lonely?”

“Always lonely without you, Syb; but except for missing you, never lonely,—you know that as well as I do. I’ve been busy all day long. The stockings first, for I *have* darned them; then I was in at Merton and Coghlan’s,—they want to see you by the way,—and I have got an order for more designs. After that there were different things to do about the house, and then to watch for you.”

"You do too much about the house, dear," Sybilla said a little anxiously.

"Does the plan work well, or not? Does it hurt me? Am I thin, worn, old before my time? A broken-down, depressed old maid?" cried Doris gaily, and still on her knees before the fire coaxing it into a brighter blaze, although it was blazing already as well as it knew how; giving a last finishing touch to the carefully brushed hearth, a touch that left no speck upon it anywhere in sight. Nothing gave to the little parlour, orderly and bright at all times, so orderly and bright an aspect, as the clean swept grate and polished bars, which were the pride of Sybilla's heart; and Doris knew it; for which reason, whatever else might chance to be overlooked when the elder sister was out, the younger invariably contrived to have that clear fire and tidy hearth to welcome Sybilla home again.

Doris old before her time! Doris worn and depressed! To see Sybilla laughing at the idea, to see her, seated in the arm-chair before the fire, and watching Doris with so much pride and love and delight in all she said and did, to see Doris laughing back over her shoulder, and having put the final touches to her work, turn round, kneeling still, to lay her head in Sybilla's lap, and submit to be coaxed and fondled as she always had to submit when the two had been apart for a whole livelong day; to see all this one would have scarcely recognized Miss Blake for the same woman, sad-looking and silent, who had driven home in the yellow tram so short a time before.

"You did not walk back, I hope?" Doris said, rising to her feet at last, her tall figure towering over the gentle elder sister and making the prettily submissive manner of Doris seem a little odd and out of keeping, but making it seem only natural that, as was in fact the case, she should so often lead where she appeared to follow; "when I saw the rain, I was sure you would not walk, for my sake, because you promised me to be careful of yourself. Did you take the yellow tram?"

"Yes; I think if it had been the other car that was standing at the top of the road when I went by, I should not have got in, but it was the yellow tram."

"Then why is your shawl wet?" Doris asked severely.

"Oh, that is because after I got out I stood to watch the car for a moment. There was a poor boy on it; he said 'Jim was bad;' I have been distressing myself that I found out no particulars."

"Of course you have! and of course you hope that Jim is very bad indeed, on purpose that you may find him soon and nurse him till he gets quite well; and of course you are breaking your heart about him now, and want to go out and get wet through looking for Jim at once."

"There is so much misery," said Sybilla, "and we can reach so little of it."

"We reach all we can," replied Doris, who, looking like the heroine of a romance, was remarkable amongst other things for a strong dash of common sense: "we



“ ‘You did not walk back, I hope,’ Doris said, rising to her feet at last.”

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reach all we can, and this boy you met to-day is amongst those we are to help."

"How can you tell?"

"Because people don't meet by chance, Syb, I am sure of that. When their paths cross and touch, it is that they have a message for one another. I've noticed it so often."

"The conductor,—I think more than ever that he was brought up a gentleman, Doris,—the conductor knew this boy."

"There! I told you so. You hold the clue you see; you will find Jim yet. Was it worth while to get your shawl soaked? But go on, tell me what happened to-day to confirm you in our opinion about that man on the yellow tram."

"A young man got in, a lawyer's clerk I fancy he must have been, he carried a blue bag that seemed to have papers in it; he and the conductor were friends, evidently, quite friends, they met as equals. I gathered it was this young man who had got the other his present start in life."

"Not much of a start," said Doris.

"So the conductor seemed to think—by the way, I knew I had something to tell you!"

"And I knew you had had adventures!"

"Doris, what shall we do—what *could* we do if we took lodgers?"

Doris let herself sink slowly down into a low chair; her blue eyes were wide open with amazement.

"Sybilla ! you haven't ?" she incoherently exclaimed.

"I'm afraid I have ; I'm very much afraid I have ; and I can't think what possessed me to do such a thing. But if you had seen her—such a capable little woman, lodging-seeking all alone. Think of it, Doris ! a child of nine or ten, perhaps, certainly no older ; a brave, independent, innocent, trusting, little creature. Why should she have been all alone and trying to find lodgings with a southern aspect, bless her little heart ? There is a history there, I am sure of that."

"Oh, then I understand," said Doris quietly.

"What is it you understand ?"

"Our letting lodgings. Naturally, if anyone is in trouble—has a history as you say—there is no escape for us ; we must let lodgings or do anything else that comes to hand. Syb," very softly, and with clear loving eyes lifted to her sister's face, "is it your own sorrows that have made you so quick to read histories as you call them, so ready to help ? Is it because you have been so very sad yourself that you understand sad things so well, and know how to console sad hearts ?"

"It may be so," said Sybilla quietly ; "and if it is, if I have any power to console—"

"You have," murmured Doris, leaning forward to kiss her sister's cheek.

"Then I bless God, Doris, for my own sorrows ; only, Heaven forbid that I should cloud your life and overshadow that, my dear !"

"You do not ; you never did ! Why, we are so happy

together always, Syb. After all, is not this almost the life we used to plan we would live, we two grown to be old maids? What difference is there, but the difference of no servant, and one or two trifles of that sort? The chief thing was that we were to be together, and alone together; and so we are, and happy together always; say so, Syb."

"Very happy, child; very happy, God be praised for that."

"Do you remember," began Doris, settling her feet comfortably on the fender,—“do you remember when we drove down this very road,—so long ago now,—you used to say you could not picture to yourself how life passed, or how it could be worth living at all in these dull houses; and that when you were in places such as this, Courtfield itself seemed a dream or in some different world, and there was nothing left in this one but dull objectless respectability?”

Sybilla laughed.

"Did I really say all that?"

"You did indeed; you said it looking out of the window of the brougham as it rolled smoothly along, and we neither of us ever thought how familiar that same row of houses seen from the yellow tram would be to us in days to come."

"Or what good friends we should find in some of them," Sybilla said.

"Or that they were all—all of them we know at least—such true homes as well as houses," added Doris.

“It was the very place for us to come to. I wonder of how many women living in this long, long row of houses, our story would be true. It is quite a common story, Syb, you know.”

She only spoke the truth ; theirs was a story that is common enough, and might be told of many women living by themselves, as these two had lived now for three years.

The Rector of Courtfield, a widower for some years previously, died, leaving his daughters with no other provision than the slender fortune his wife had brought him on her marriage. From the comforts and refinements of one of the prettiest rectories in England, Sybilla and Doris fell at once into the comparative poverty of one hundred and fifty pounds a-year between them. The sisters were singularly destitute of relations, and though in the early days of their bereavement friends flocked round them, and advice was plentiful, Sybilla soon saw their future depended upon themselves.

Everyone imagined they would take some small cottage in their old neighbourhood, but instead of that the sisters went to London. Either Sybilla foresaw too many petty mortifications in a life led in the old place under new circumstances, or she had some other reason for wishing to hide herself from former acquaintances, break altogether with the past, and start afresh. After a long and weary search, the Red House was found obtainable at a rent within their means, and thither they betook themselves with such of the Rectory furniture as it was really neces-

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sary to keep, and a great many books, pictures, odds and ends of all kinds that were not at all necessary, but from which they could not bring themselves to part. As Doris observed, they could always fall back upon these things at a pinch and sell them if they were ever in great need of money.

They were not idle. Both were fairly skilful with the pencil, Sybilla the more so, and Doris Sybilla's pupil. The elder sister gave a few lessons occasionally, but occupied herself principally in illustrating books; the younger had an independent little business of her own in designing Christmas cards and valentines, and it was pretty to see the delight and pride she took in it. Thus they added to their means, and led the quiet uneventful life of thousands of women in the like circumstances.

"If you have really done such a dreadful thing as promise to let the spare rooms, we may be driven to keep a servant after all," said Doris, who for the last few minutes had been considering ways and means.

"I don't know that I should regret that much," answered Sybilla. "I do not like to see you doing house-work, child—it does not matter for myself."

"Now how conceited that is of you! To fancy you can sweep a floor, clean out a room, make beds, lay tables, cook, and all the rest of it, and that I cannot."

"You were always accustomed to be waited on till we came here."

"But"—Doris lifted up her eyebrows comically,—“I

just ask you where *is* the good of being poor if we are to be worried with servants as though we were rich people still?"

"You did not find the maids a worry in old times, and they wore such tidy caps with cherry-coloured ribbons," said Sybilla, pathetically.

Perhaps she did not see the good of being poor; her eyes were full of tears; the crash and jangling of a tramway car was heard outside; the branch of the Virginia creeper, shaken by the wind, knocked at the window pane, but in imagination Sybilla was once more at Courtfield, and she and Doris were waiting for the parlour-maid to bring in the tea.

"I will wear a tidy cap and cherry-coloured ribbons if you like," laughed Doris.

"I think we *might* afford a little maid," Sybilla said, looking wistfully at the bright face before her, "and leave you more at leisure, dear; we are quite comfortably off—with what we earn—quite comfortably, when you come to think of others who have less."

"It is because we *do* think of others who have less—because *you* think of them so much, dear Syb, and bear all their sorrows on your heart, and ever pray to be brought near to people in distress—it is because of that, you know it is, that we need all we earn," cried Doris, her eyes shining; "what have we to do, we two with no other tie but one another, what *have* we to do but just to help all we can reach who are less happy, less safe and sheltered than ourselves?"

"True," said Sybilla, thoughtfully, "we have nothing else to do but that; it is our life-work, Doris."

"Then you see we need all we earn, and must have no servant here to eat it up—she *would* eat, you will grant me that?" Doris was laughing again now; the earnestness with which she had just spoken had left a flush upon her cheek, but she was talking now in the old merry way that cheered the depressed spirits of her sister always.

"Yes, I suppose she would eat," said Sybilla smiling.

"Three mouths to fill instead of two, and less to give away!" cried Doris triumphantly, and reckoning on her fingers as she spoke; "then she will break the glass and china—you allow that?"

"I am sure I hope she will not!"

"So do I, for I hope she never will be here to do it! Then think of her wages."

"Exactly; and that is why I fear I did wrong to yield to your wish three years ago, and take a house at all. We should have gone into lodgings—"

"Instead of letting them," put in Doris.

"There you would have been waited on as you were used to be."

"By a little maid with cherry ribbons in her cap; the cap *is* so essential, Syb."

"Don't be foolish, child! At least in lodgings you would have had no house-work to do, and yet no expense for servants' keep or wages."

"And no *home*," Doris said with emphasis; "you

speak as if *I* did everything, Sybilla, and that is so selfish of you, when you know quite well you do your own share, and far more than that, of all we undertook together. And after all, if it is house-rent that has swallowed up the little maid, cap, ribbons, and white apion too, Syb, it need not have been so had we lived in the country still. A little country cottage, what would that have cost us now ?”

“Do you regret the country ? You said we were so happy here ; scarcely a moment ago you said it.”

It was the elder sister’s turn to look anxiously for confirmation of these words. She pressed her hand upon her heart, as though the speech of Doris had woke some old pain there that Sybilla strove to still again.

“Since you would not,—I mean since we *could* not, for you know best always, I am not complaining, Syb,—since we could not keep a home there, we were bound, were we not, to keep one here ?” said Doris, gazing thoughtfully into the fire.

“How ‘bound ?’ what should bind us but our own wishes now ?”

“He might come.”

“Nothing more unlikely ;” the voice of Sybilla was hard.

“Still—would he know where to find us if he did come ?”

“Why should he know ? If there is one thing more than another that I set myself to do when we were left

alone, one hope dearer than another that I have cherished in these three years, it has been to keep *you* safe from the sorrow that he brings on all of us in turn."

"Must he—our own brother—*must* he bring sorrow?" asked Doris wonderingly.

"What else did he ever bring?"

"If he should need us?" Doris spoke with a gentle persistence, and yet with a certain humility that seemed to acknowledge Sybilla must be right, even when to Doris she appeared wrong.

For a moment there was no answer, then Sybilla said, "Tom can find us if he will; for the rest, he must reap as he has sown, we all do that; remember it, Doris."

"I do remember it," Doris answered, turning with a pretty fondling gesture towards the sister who had been as a mother to her all her life; "thinking of you, dear Syb, I often and often remember 'they who sow in tears shall reap in joy.' And we need not sow anger against a brother, need we? That would be a bitter crop to reap."

"Not anger, of course; but poor Tom did harm enough to you in robbing us of all we should have had—it all went to pay his debts, was squandered on his extravagant pursuits—he shall not rob us of each other."

"Oh, Syb! he never could do that."

"Who knows? He might rob me of you at all events—does rob me of you, when you think of him still, speak

of him still, are not content with me who, in seeking to keep you to myself, seek only to protect and guard you, Doris—but wish for him always, him whom surely you cannot remember, you were a child when he last went away.”

“I do remember him. At least I recollect a tall, kind playfellow, who took me out into the fields and lanes, and put me up upon his horse to let me ride round to the stables—that must have been Tom I think. I recollect some one holding me on the top step of the windmill on Silver Hill, while the wind blew so strongly, that but for a strong arm round me, I should have been blown quite away; I seem to feel the wind now when I recall it, and to feel the protecting arm I clung to—Tom again, Syb, was it not? I remember coming home tired and dusty, through all the summer dust that lay so thick in those dear lanes about our home, and being lifted up by some one and carried pick-a-back; surely that was Tom. I seem to recollect some one besides papa who played with me, was good to me always, and got me into oh! so many scrapes, and that *must* have been Tom you know. In my fancy, in the dim childish remembrance of him, that is all I have,—he seems to be a merry, thoughtless, good, kind, elder brother always. Am I wrong in these recollections of him?”

“You remember nothing else then? How should you?”

“Only that as I grew older his name had become a forbidden sound; only that at the mention of it poor

papa looked grave, and you cried, Syb; only that the maids shook their heads if I asked about him; only that I wondered so often where he was, and when he would come home again. I know there was some great wrong, but what was it, what *could* it have been that you, you of all people in the world, find it so hard to forgive?"

These words startled Sybilla.

"Forgive," she repeated,—“child, I have forgiven long ago.”

“What was the wrong, Syb?”

“You know it, Doris; you know poor Tom’s wild, thoughtless ways broke our mother’s heart at last, and she died calling for him, begging my father never to be hard on him, for they had spoiled him always, she said, and were but reaping as they had sown.”

“Yes, I know all that,” said Doris softly.

“And as for ourselves, it was explained to you that when our father died we should have been left well off but for—”

“Oh, Syb,” Doris interrupted, “we do not care for that, we never did care for that wrong; we have quite enough.”

“You know,—the knowledge surely came to you by degrees, although you may never have been directly told of it,—you know how Tom was a secret care and trouble to my father for so many years, how he was never so much as heard of except when he wanted money, the money that of late years it was often hard to find,” Sybilla went on.

"I know that also,—what more is there to tell?" said Doris.

"He could make people believe anything he liked. With all his faults, with all the care he caused them, and though he broke his mother's heart, and was a life-long grief to his father, they loved him better than they loved me."

"You did not mind that, I even think you were glad of that," whispered Doris, her eyes seeming to question Sybilla still.

"Yet it was hard that he should come between me and my mother at last," the elder sister continued; "it half broke my heart that she died blaming me for judging him too harshly, charging me not to widen the breach between him and my father, and this with almost her last breath, Doris, and without one word of tender leave-taking. It was hard to be misunderstood."

"Very, very hard; but you forgave that also. I have heard you speak of it before, I know it all, and yet I do not know what wrong it is that you have not forgiven even yet."

Again the word seemed to startle Sybilla.

"I have forgiven," she said once more. "I hope I have forgiven long ago,—that the power to do so fully came in answer to the prayers, my only refuge then."

"Was it—had Tom anything to do with your great trouble?" Doris spoke with hesitation and in a low voice; she left the chair in which she had been sitting, and knelt down by her sister. "Forgive me for asking,"

Doris whispered, half frightened at the look in Sybilla's eyes.

"You *have* asked, therefore you shall hear ; and then, child, we will speak of this no more, and perhaps you will blame me less, as I see you have blamed me in your thoughts ; at least I will not be misunderstood by you, my darling ; Tom shall not bring that about, although to-day he seems—poor fellow, you must not think me hard on him, Doris—to be standing between you and me, as he has stood between me and all I loved."

"*No one* can stand between us," said Doris ; "not even Tom."



CHAPTER III.

SYBILLA'S STORY.

SYBILLA, although she had resolved to confide to Doris all she wished to hear, and had decided there should no longer be any reservations between them, seemed to find it difficult to begin her recital, or even so much as to approach the subject. She began to talk about Courtfield, the life there, the aspect of the place, the long village street with the church standing in its midst, the outlying cottages nestled amongst trees, the rectory, and the steep bank crowned by a thorn hedge which was just opposite the gate, the bank that at this season must be, the sisters knew, one sheet of blue and pale gold, so covered was it in the spring with primroses and scentless violets. And then, after many tender words about the old home, Sybilla came to a full stop altogether, and seemed to have no more to say.

“ People living side by side know so little of each other

after all," she began again at last; "it is confusing to try and explain things to one who has a half knowledge of the facts already."

"I have a very perfect knowledge of that bank," said Doris; "one of my earliest recollections is of stumbling up it to fill my hands with flowers, and being puzzled that the more one picked the more there seemed to be."

"Tom and I gathered primroses there before you were born," Sybilla said; "sat there later, when we were a little older, and made plans together. Later still he confided to me his school scrapes, as we talked, half-hidden by the ferns, under the hedge. It was a convenient spot in which to exchange confidences, for it commanded the rectory garden and both doors of the house, so that we could see when my father came in or out. Very often you were on my knee; now and then I found Tom had carried you up there before I came—at the risk of your neck, poor baby!"

"I *knew* he got me into scrapes," said Doris with a satisfied smile, as though that was a merit of Tom's.

Sybilla went on:

"Even in those days he wanted money; his allowance, with mine added to it, was never enough for him; even in those days it used to strike me painfully that all his friends, and he had so many, seemed sooner or later to get into trouble because of him. He would bring such nice boys home for the holidays, and it always turned out that somehow or other he had led them wrong—at

first, of course, only into boyish scrapes ; by-and-by, as years went on, into more serious trouble still."

"But you and he continued friends through all ; I'm sure of that."

"I loved him," Sybilla answered, "but I lost faith in him, Doris. I remember how bitter it was to lose it by degrees, to know I could not look up to him, for that with all his winning ways he was not to be depended upon, for he had not one grain of principle, and self was the centre of everything he said and did. So affectionate in his manner, so little affectionate at heart, or it would not have been 'out of sight, out of mind' with him as it was. It was such a holiday when he was at home,—I am speaking of his college days, and of the years that followed them,—such a sight to see my mother's pride and joy in him, and his loving ways with her, to see my father forgetting any trouble Tom had given, and rejoicing to have him with us. No wonder they gave him everything he asked for, and forgave him everything. Time after time his debts were paid,—'We will save for our girls by-and-by, when Tom grows steady and has settled down,' my father used to say. Tom never grew steady, he never settled down ; but the hardest thing of all was how completely he forgot us when once he was away from Courtfield. We hardly ever heard from him, until he would come in, his own old merry self, and come because he wanted something—always because he wanted something."

"He was welcome though," Doris observed.

"A welcome never failed him, come how he would," said Sybilla; "but I grew to dread his coming. He was welcomed with so much joy, and left sorrow behind him so invariably. My mother blamed me even then for being harsh in my judgment of him, and yet I fancy she shared that judgment in her own secret thoughts. You know the two little graves near the lych gate, Doris, the graves we dressed with flowers every Sunday of our lives?"

Doris bowed her head.

"My little brothers' graves," she said.

"Yes; they came between you and myself, and both died in infancy. Once after Tom had left us, having paid one of his short and rare visits, I found my mother standing by those little mounds. It was a lovely summer evening. Tom had taken his usual affectionate farewell of her; it had been a happier parting than usual, but still—perhaps for that very reason—it was on that occasion that dear mother, who loved Tom so much, whispered to me as we stood by the lych gate, and the setting sun shone on her babies' graves: 'I repined sadly at the time, but oh, Sybilla, I sometimes think if Tom had gone home safely when he too was an innocent little child!' She never blamed him, never would hear a word against him, but she said those words, Doris,—his mother, who loved him so.

"Well, it was after that very visit that things went from bad to worse; our mother, never strong, failed visibly; the sight of Tom's handwriting was the signal

for tears, still more trying was the weary anxious watch for letters that never came. I grew to dread the post hour. There is no need to tell you all that was said, and we knew too truly said, of poor Tom at that time."

"I do not wish to be told,"—Doris made a little gesture with her hand, as though to waive that subject, and bid Sybilla go on to something else.

"I did not myself know exactly. I had a happiness apart from the others at that time. You remember—" Sybilla's voice died away.

"I remember Lawrence," Doris answered gravely, "though, I think sometimes I mix up Tom and him together in my mind. I was a very little thing, you know."

"Such a little thing! our little bridesmaid that was to be."

There was silence until Doris touched her sister softly on the arm :

"Don't tell me of his death, dear Syb ; pass over that. It hurts you too much."

"His death! that was not the worst. Do you think his death alone, however great the shock of it, would have broken my heart? I will tell you, Doris, because I want you to see there are worse things than death. I want you to see how truly we reap as we sow, and what a bitter harvest I have reaped from a few hasty words.

"We had sent you away to a school for young children ; my mother fancied you needed little companions of your

own age. Lawrence was with us, we were to be married in the spring. Of course he and I talked often of my brother, but the two young men had never met. At last Tom came. I think Lawrence was surprised at first to see how warmly Tom was received. But that was the way always. However great his faults, however great the misery they caused, his welcome was ready for him always."

"Of course," remarked Doris.

Sybilla looked at the girl a little curiously, then resumed her story.

"Lawrence said to me the very first evening, what a nice fellow Tom was. I detected in the tone, more than in any words he used, that Lawrence accused me of having done injustice to my brother. Such natural good qualities, so much gay good-humour, such seeming warm affection for his family, must surely go hand in hand with sterling worth, Lawrence thought. The two grew friends. Then I saw over again just what I had seen so often when Tom was a boy, how surely he deteriorated the character of those he led, how surely their standard was lowered, their principles corrupted. They went away together. For the first time in his life Lawrence got into money difficulties of some sort. I hardly understand how. Why *is* it that men want so much money? What *do* they find to do with it? Why should nearly all their troubles and wrong-doing have to do in some shape or other with money?" Sybilla broke off in her narrative to propound this question.

"Oh, they *are* men, you know," said Doris, coolly, as though that fact accounted for any eccentricity.

"As time went on, Lawrence grew less content with us and the quiet Courtfield life,—you know, don't you, Doris, that he was learning farming, as Harold learned later, and living at Old Court farm?—he grew more and more pleased with Tom and the company to which he introduced him. For awhile they were constantly running up to town together, coming back to us only when their finances ran short. I saw my mother growing paler and paler, I saw that my father began to look more and more anxious, and I saw the change stealing over Lawrence."

"Change towards you?"

"No, oh no! never changed in that. To me the same always, but less true, less high in his aims and thoughts, less himself, as he and our brother were together. I hoped for more influence over him when we were married, and the time was near now, the time that was to make me a happy, happy wife. I liked looking at the wedding clothes mother had provided for me. A very simple outfit,—‘Sybilla would not mind; Tom needed all there was to spare; there would be years in which to save for little Doris, and fit her out splendidly some day,’ my father said. I did not mind, of course, and almost the only unclouded recollection I have of our dear mother's later years is of the hours we passed together sewing at my wedding clothes, while she forgot all cares in my bright prospects, and talked so kindly to me,

painting a happy wedded life as the happiest of all lives that could be lived. Nothing could come near or so much as touch our happiness in one another she said,—and I knew she spoke out of her own experience,—*nothing*, not even troubles with the children if we had any. There might be troubles, would be, she was sure of that, but the love of husband and wife who were truly one, was a thing apart from everything else in the whole world. I could not understand it, mother said smiling, but I should find her words true every day of my life, for she knew Lawrence and I loved each other. I believed every word she said, and liked dearly to hear her say them. And so the spring opened, the primroses were out on the bank, it wanted three weeks only to the time fixed for our marriage, when Lawrence and Tom settled to have, as they called it, one more lark together, and run up for a few days to town.

“For once I made a stand. I so dreaded their going away together, and they seemed to have some secret between them which Lawrence would not confide to me. He would have no secrets by-and-by, he said, but would tell me everything ; but this was more Tom’s affair than his, and he could not tell it me until we were married. We were standing by the gate as we talked ; I looked up at the blue and gold of the flowery bank,—I can see it now, Doris, as I saw it then.”

“As we have seen it together so many springs,” said Doris.

“It has never looked to me as it looked that spring,”

Sybilla went on ; “Tom joined us after a while, gay, good-humoured, but as much bent on having his way as I on having mine. Lawrence agreed with him, there was no help for it, they must go, he said. Then Tom exclaimed ‘You’ve not told her!’ and of course I was more than ever anxious to know what he meant.

“Lawrence began to say something about money that must be paid—some debt, I could not understand what, but I knew my father had paid Tom’s debts again quite lately, and Lawrence had passed his word that he had none of his own. Tom was laughing now ; treating it as a joke that my father had been deceived, and Lawrence asked me what it could possibly signify that his words had not been literally true before, since they would be true by the time we were actually married. This money paid, he should really owe nothing. He must go to London to get the money, he explained, at which Tom laughed again.

“I spoke out then. Oh, if only, having kept silence so long, I had kept silence and been patient just a little longer ! I reproached Lawrence with having no will of his own, no strength of principle ; and Tom with leading Lawrence astray, as he had led all who ever had followed in his footsteps from the time he was a boy. I said hard things to both of them. To Tom it appeared only a good joke, but the colour of Lawrence deepened. If I really thought so badly of him, he began ; and then Tom, laughing still, led him off with him to the stables. They meant to ride to the station, as they were in the habit of



"Lawrence half checked his horse—I think he waited for a kind word."
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doing, leaving the horses at the little railway inn, for our man—gardener and groom in one—to fetch home later, taking that of Lawrence to the Court Farm as he passed, I was at the gate still when they rode by a few minutes later. Tom cried out gaily that he supposed I had no objection to *his* going. Lawrence half checked his horse, I think he waited for a kind word, but when he heard me say in answer to Tom that the sooner he went and the longer he stayed away the better, he rode on at once, just saying as he passed me, 'Perhaps you would prefer *my* staying away altogether ; it is not too late yet.' We were both angry—oh, Doris, we were both angry that day, and we had never exchanged an unkind word in all our lives till then !”

“Surely you made it up again,” said Doris, gently ; “one has heard of lovers’ quarrels.”

“So I said to myself by-and-by when I cooled down ; it was a lovers’ quarrel ; our first, and it should be our last, I made up my mind to that.”

“And was it ?”

“I never saw him again, dear ; he was killed that day.”

The very quietness with which Sybilla spoke made her words more terrible to Doris.

“The horses were fresh,” Sybilla went on in the same quiet way ; “that of Lawrence took fright, he was thrown, the horse turned and set off at full speed along the way it had just come, never stopping until it reached our stable door, a stable as familiar to it as its own. The foot of the rider was held fast in the stirrup. It is a

steep hill down to the rectory gate—a steep, stony hill—and I was still standing at the gate where they had left me. Surely you knew all this before.”

“No, oh no! I knew it was an accident. I never knew you saw it,” said Doris sobbing.

“Yes, I saw it,” Sybilla said; “we parted in anger, and we never met again. Don’t cry so, dear child—it happened long ago.”

But beyond bidding her not to cry, Sybilla made no attempt to soothe her sister, and only sat gazing into the fire as though she saw pictured in it the scene she had described. There was a long pause before either spoke again, then Sybilla said,

“From that time to this, Tom only came home once. My mother got the idea that it was owing to me, because of the trouble he had brought upon me, that he stayed away. I do not think it was. He must have had something to make him happy and content away from us, or he would have come home. We hardly knew how or where he lived, only he seemed to want more money than ever, and, except when he wanted it, his letters were more rare than ever. We knew very little of him; but surely you, who know me so well, Doris, know that it was *not* I who banished him—it was no fault of mine.”

“I am sure it was no fault of yours; but I am sure, too, he could not bear to see you.”

“He bore it very well the only time we did meet, a year after my mother’s death. One would have thought the past was all forgotten. I believe he was shocked

and grieved at the time the accident happened—it would be like him to be so ; I do not speak of my own knowledge, for I have only an indistinct remembrance of the weeks that followed. When I began to recollect things clearly, Tom was gone, the spring was past, it was high summer, the primroses were over, and tall foxgloves stood in the hedgerow.”

“And I had come home from school,” Doris said.

“You never left me any more ; I should have died without you, dear,” Sybilla answered simply.

“You and papa heard from Tom now and then—I knew when the letters came.”

“They came when he wanted anything,” Sybilla said.

“And we have no other relations,” said Doris musingly.

“No near relations, unless our father’s brother is still living ; they quarrelled and parted quite early in life.”

“Our family must be famous for quarrels,” said Doris.

“There has been no other ; no one ever quarrelled with Tom. He simply staid away ; and you mustn’t think I do not forgive all the trouble he caused to me, to our dear father, to mother ; you must not think that if he needed me I should hesitate for a moment to go to him, to give him all I had—all but one thing, and that I *will* keep to myself, the one dear joy of my joyless life.”

Sybilla put her arms round Doris, and held her tightly, as though she feared even then to be robbed of her treasure.

“Tom did not come, or write even, when papa died,” Doris said after a moment.

"No, therefore it is clear he is well off," replied Sybilla with some bitterness; "otherwise he would not have failed to claim his share of the little there was left."

"It was good and generous of him to leave it all for us."

"Is that the moral you draw? You find Tom good and generous?"

Sybilla could not help smiling; Doris smiled too.

"We will not speak of him any more just now," she said.

"And you will be content with poor old me?" said Sybilla pleadingly.

"I content with *you*! Oh no! how can you suppose such a thing as that I should be content with my mother, sister, friend, in one—my dear, old, foolish Syb!" the girl cried, laughing, and on the brink of tears at the same time.

"And you will not wish for Tom?"

"It is so natural to wish for him," said truthful Doris.

"You would leave me for him to-morrow, if fate brings you together."

"I would *never* leave you."

"Tom had such a way with him to make people like him."

"It must have been a very nice way," said Doris.

Sybilla gave an impatient sigh. "I thought we were not to talk of him any more," she said.

"We will not,—at least no more just now,—we will have tea, and as it is of no use to ring the bell, because

that girl is not in the house—she never *would* be in the house you know, but for ever running out and giving trouble in all sorts of ways—as it is no use ringing for her, I'll go and fetch the tea myself.”

Then ensued a pleasant stir and movement, as Doris went and came, fetched the tea-things, brought the kettle in, and set the table. Sybilla did not offer to help; she lay back restfully in the big arm chair; the expression of melancholy, habitual to her features, gave way to the look of interest and affection with which she always did watch Doris, whatever it was that Doris might be doing. Depressed and saddened by the sorrow of her early youth, by the constant pressure of home's cares, the loss of her mother, and the supervision of her widowed father's home, Sybilla had comparatively early in life given up that search for happiness which more or less consciously is an object with us all, and had aimed only at making Doris happy—if that were possible.

“Now,” cried the girl gaily, her arrangements complete at last, and contemplating with pride the cosy table with its snowy cloth, the tempting thin bread-and-butter, the bunch of watercress and plate of ham, to say nothing of the pretty cups, relics of Courtfield days, or the kettle on the hob, a kettle as bright as ever parlour-maid in *any* coloured cap ribbons kept kettle yet,—“now, where will you find in all London a cosier little home than ours? As I said once before this afternoon, it was the very place for us to come to. It has only one drawback.”

"And that is?" asked Sybilla, drawing her chair to the table,—“the drawback is?”

“The pig,” said Doris with a really mournful intonation.

“My dear Doris!”

“Well, there always *was* to have been a pig, and here there is no place for him.”

After that speech the sisters began their meal in silence, that for some minutes was broken only by the dash of a shower against the window panes, the singing of the kettle on the hob, and the rattle of the yellow tram as it passed up the road,—a noise they were so much accustomed to, they would have noticed it at once had the intervals between the cars been for any cause longer or shorter than was usually the case. It was not a romantic association of ideas, but when Doris spoke of the pig, she must, Sybilla knew, be thinking of Harold Bannerman. In the days when the two sisters planned to live together somewhere in the country, Doris insisting always that, when the time came, they must keep a pig, Harold had claimed to be allowed to supply them with that interesting animal. He was learning farming then in the neighbourhood of Courtfield, but was far away now. Sybilla was a little anxious at finding Doris still thought of him; it was not likely she would ever see him again, or so Sybilla believed,—a proof how short-sighted and inexperienced Miss Blake was.

This world being after all so small a world, there really was no good reason, just because Doris lived in

the suburbs of London, and Harold presumably somewhere or other on the wide Australian plains, no good reason why they should not run against each other in the street at any moment.



CHAPTER IV.

MEG'S PRIMROSES.



SLEEPY little place; only a road-side station. The shed, the signal box, the station-master's cottage, with the miniature ticket-office adjoining, all looked too picturesque, standing in the shelter of woods on either side, to have anything to do with such prosaic things as railways.

Primroses grew thickly in the woods, where the tassels hung upon the hazel boughs; blue hyacinths were out here and there, and delicate anemones and wood sorrel trembled on their stalks. The birds were building; now and then the note of the cuckoo might be heard; a little field mouse ran about near the iron rails; there was no one to disturb it, no one in sight except the young wife of the station-master, who, holding her infant in her arms, paced slowly up and down the warm sunny space before the door of the ticket-office. A peaceful, sleepy

spot, until the panting engine came up along the line and stood hissing discordantly, puffing out its clouds of hot, white steam, and the baby woke up and cried, the field mouse ran frightened away, and a porter appeared upon the platform.

Few trains stopped here. As a rule they rushed shrieking past, making the ground tremble, bringing the young mother to the window to hold up her babe and let it see them go by, summoning the signalman to his post, and leaving the place almost instantly, as quiet and sleepy as they found it. True, by the early parliamentary in the morning one or two of the neighbouring farmers, perhaps even some one from the village, would start upon a journey, on market days especially ; and now and then, throughout the day, a goods train would crawl past. But the parliamentary and the goods were leisurely trains and sleepy themselves ; the only moment in which the station really woke up was the moment at which the down express was due. Then little groups of children might be seen hanging over the bridge below the station ; labourers in the adjacent fields condescended to stand still and watch, for the express stopped here by signal, and, about four o'clock every afternoon, it became an exciting question to those at leisure to look on whether it *would* stop or not, whether or not there was a passenger for Courtfield.

One spring afternoon when the sunshine was warm, the air mild, and the leaves everywhere unfolding, there was such a passenger. The school children, always rather

doubtful as to which was best, to see the train stop and watch the slight stir about the place, perhaps see a fly drive up, or the carriage from the Court, or to have it rush away beneath them as they swung upon the low parapet of the bridge, saw this passenger alight, and, walking through the ticket-office to the sunny space beyond, stand there looking about him.

It seemed to him that he was in the heart of the little wood through which the road before him led. At some distance off the church tower rose against the sky, but from this spot the village was hidden by the trees.

"You have a quiet place here," the traveller said, when the rush and roar of the train had died away, and the station-master, who was porter into the bargain, came out from the office and looked a little curious as to what a gentleman without luggage, and evidently a stranger, could be doing there at all. "I suppose you can direct me to Courtfield?"

"This *is* Courtfield," the man glanced at the white fence—glaringly white in the sunshine—upon which the name was painted; "for the Court, sir?"

"No; is the village far from here?"

"A short half mile."

"In which direction?"

The station-master pointed to the church tower. "You can't go wrong with that to guide you, sir. For the rectory, I suppose?"

"Never you mind," said the traveller sharply, as he set off along the woodland road. There could be no

doubt about his being a stranger. He paused often to look about him, and crossing the bridge, leaned upon the parapet for a few minutes to gaze up and down the line. The children who had been idling there a few moments before, were idling now upon the road in front of him; a little group of them, stopping every instant to gather wild flowers from the hedges, stopping to talk eagerly amongst themselves, little heads all near together, little tongues going all at once; then starting suddenly, in a business-like manner, as though having but one end and aim in life, and that to reach home without delay, but just as suddenly subsiding into talk again, into loitering by the hedge, with no aim or end at all, and looking as if they never had or could have any serious purpose in anything they did, but *might*, if so fate willed it, reach home accidentally by-and-by.

One of the little maidens among this group lagging behind the rest, and being, when the stranger came up with her, quite alone, they fell into conversation together, which began by the child shyly offering to him the flowers she held in her hand. Rashly accepting them, the traveller found he must linger and accept many more; for the little creature, with not the smallest doubt that primroses were as precious to this wayfarer as to herself, darted every instant from his side to pluck more still, until the bunch he carried grew formidably large, and the bronzed face beneath the grey hair and dark shaggy eyebrows grew comically embarrassed as to how to dispose of all this floral wealth so generously lavished upon

him. For the rest, he seemed to have as little fixed purpose as the children had, but to be quite content to idle away the sunny moments with this small village child.

What was he to do with all these flowers? he asked.

Stick them in a jug of water, and they'd smell sweet, she told him, gathering more and more until one even of his large hands could only just hold the nosegay.

"But you have none yourself; come, let's go shares."

Oh, no, she wanted none; could pick them every day; the rector told her that people in London had no flowers. Poor "people in London," how she pitied them!

"Did she like living in this village? was it a happy place?" he asked, standing still to look up the long straggling street upon which they were now entering.

"A happy place? oh yes—when we are good. The rector says no place is happy if you are not good in it."

"He has taught you that much, has he?"

"He teaches us—every Sunday, in Sunday school, you know."

"And preaches long sermons to you in the church, doesn't he?"

The child shook her head and coloured, and half-whispering owned they were very long.

"I'm not good—I go to sleep sometimes," she confessed the sin with many blushes.

"Ah, but what does he preach about now? Can you tell me that? How does *he* teach other folks their duties, I wonder. I should be puzzled to set about it.

He was a clever fellow always." The stranger, having got thus far on his way to the village, was loitering very much as the children had loitered in that aimless way of theirs: "What did the rector preach about last Sunday, now, for instance?"

He hardly expected the child to answer him, was indeed speaking in a half-musing way, more to himself than her, but understanding the question, she replied gravely to it, in clear childish tones repeating the last Sunday's text, which she remembered well enough, it being one of her duties to learn that and write it out, however sleepy she might be in sermon time. Slowly and distinctly the words dropped from her lips.

"'Be not deceived; God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.'"

"Eh, who told you to say that? Why do you say that to me?"

The child was half frightened at the vehemence with which her companion spoke, at the way in which he turned to her suddenly, as though she had said something that startled and surprised him.

"It was the text," she faltered.

"The text? What, last Sunday's text—and *I* come here to-day and ask you what it was? The thing can't be; you must have said it on purpose, child. The thing can't be, you know."

"It *was* the text," she repeated, sturdily, "and the sermon was about sowing seed."

"Of course, of course; I know all that. Well, little

one, can you show me where the Rectory is? A quiet spot, a quiet peaceful spot in which to pass all the years I have been away. Ours must have been very different lives."

"Sir?"

He was talking dreamily to himself, but roused up as she spoke.

"Show me the Rectory," he said again. "Come, little friend, take me to the Rector who teaches you to sow good seed."

"Here comes the Rector, sir."

The figure of a man was in sight, walking down the street towards them. People stopped to speak to him as he passed, the children ran out from the cottage doors on either side, to win from him a kind word or look, the little maiden shook herself as a little bird shakes its feathers and sets itself to rights, but as the man drew nearer, the stranger, whom the little maid was guiding, exclaimed—

"That's not the Rector!"

"It is," the child affirmed.

"My eyes deceive me then, or he is too far away—I cannot see him clearly you know. And yet Time does not add inches to the height; whatever else it does, Time bows the frame rather than makes it more upright. He can't be changed as much as that."

"He is not changed at all," the little girl said earnestly; "and it *is* the Rector."

"How long has he been here?"

"Oh, a long, long time."

Be it known that the little maid was fully seven !

"A long time of course ; you are right there, a long, long time—" the traveller gave a sigh of relief as though some sudden fear he had felt disappeared before those last words of his small guide.

"Yes—*quite* three whole years ; I know it is as much as that, for I heard mother say so," she observed, complacently.

"Three years !"

The Rector, who had delayed to look in for an instant at one of the open cottage-doors, drew near at last, so near that, had he been the man the other sought or hoped to meet, the recognition must have taken place. As it was, the Rector, just glancing at the traveller, or rather glancing with a half-smile of amusement at the large bunch of primroses he carried, would have gone by in silence had not the child exclaimed timidly, but with much emphasis,

"It *is* the Rector, sir ; indeed it is."

"Who doubts it, Meg ?" he said then ; and stopping to raise his hat courteously to the stranger, asked was that to be their introduction to one another, and in what way could he serve him.

The traveller seemed embarrassed, and ill at ease.

"You take me by surprise," he began ; I looked to see another man in your place."

"An old friend, perhaps ?"

"A brother."

"The late Rector, doubtless."

"I suppose so—yes, to be sure ; the late Rector. He has another living then,—has left Courtfield you say ? "

"Left it for——" The clergyman, his heart warming to this man who had not refused the flowers of little Meg, and who stood now looking so bewildered and confused, put his hand on the child's shoulder, and bade her run away home. It was not till the little figure was out of sight that he resumed the sentence he had left unfinished. "The late Rector died here three years ago," he said then, in a voice full of sympathy.

The other answered eagerly that even so the brother he sought might have changed livings long before that—it did not follow that his brother was the man who died.

"I should have written first," he went on ; "not taken things for granted, as I have done ever since I got back to England, and made nothing but mistakes in consequence."

A few more words however, an eager question or two, and a quiet reply, left him no longer any hope ; he was quite silent for a few minutes, then pointed to the church as though it were in that direction he still wished to go. His companion turned with him, walking quietly by his side through the village.

"You find changes here," he observed once, seeing how the stranger looked about him.

"Never was here in my life before. My brother was a curate when I saw him last. Since he got this living I never saw him at all."



"The two stood looking down upon the grave."

"But heard of him, of course."

"Very rarely; and I have had no news of him or his for very many years now. We had quarrelled."

"Life is too short for that," the Rector said.

"There were only two of us; I put off making friends till I should come home; meaning to do it then, fully meaning to do it then. Was sure of finding him, you know, at any time, or so I thought, though he would have been puzzled to find me. I've come home rich. He had a boy and girl when I last heard of him—where are they? His wife too—where is she?"

They were at the lych gate now; the Rector opened it and went into the churchyard.

"His wife lies here beside him," he said; "you see by the date upon the headstone that she died first."

"Here!"

The two stood looking down upon the grave, on which, by-and-by, Meg's primroses began softly, one by one, to fall from the hands that held them. The Rector, watching his chance companion silently, was a little surprised to hear him say, when he spoke again at last, pausing in his speech every now and then to watch the flowers as they fell,

"There was a young fellow asked me once—a day or two ago only—where I supposed the men and women went to; the men and women that come and go through all the world, so many, such countless numbers of them. It had struck me sometimes myself to wonder where

they went, to remember that in the end they all come here, so surely here, and nowhere else."

"Not here;" the Rector raised his hand slightly towards the blue sky flecked with white clouds above their heads,—“not here, but *there*,” he said.

“Here first, through the grave and gate of death; here first of all. Weary feet, finding life so rough a road; light feet of boys and girls; firm tread of men who *are* men, and at work in the world; all treading the path that leads only to *this* at last. I might have known there was but one place where we were *sure* of meeting. I might have been wise enough to seek here first and have looked no further, unless I failed to find him—where I have found him.”

For a few moments the flowers fell in silence on the mound, where he still scattered them one by one.

“His children?” he said then.

“The son turned out badly, I have heard; the two daughters left here at once.”

“Poor?”

“I am afraid they are.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“Not in real want though. There must be many in this place can tell you of them.”

“If they were in want so much the better for me now,” the traveller said; “the seed I flattered myself that I was sowing all these years was to have borne a crop of peace and happiness that Tom and I might reap

together, a crop it never could have yielded, you know, when the seed itself sprung from pride that would not let me come home empty-handed to say, 'I was wrong; forgive me;' would not let me write even for fear of a repulse. The only crop that could spring from such seed as that I reap here, and reap alone. '*Whatsoever* a man soweth—' you said so yourself last Sunday."

"How did you know that?"

"The child—little Meg you called her—told me the text, preached a sermon to me by the roadside. A good little maid, I'm sure; what could I do better with her flowers than leave them here?"

They were all there by this time; the grave was golden with them. Robert Blake turned away from it at last.

"It comes hard on me," he said; "I have no other ties. I counted on making his children mine."

"You can do that still," said the Rector, thinking within himself that if the inevitable consequences of our own actions grow out of them, the loving remembrance of his kindred that surely had struggled with this man's pride, would bear its own fruit too,—“you can do that still. Come to the Rectory, and rest there awhile. There is an up-train at eight. Long before that you will have learned all you wish to know.”

"You are very good; I'll take you at your word. They went to London, I suppose. Everyone goes to London! A wilderness of a place for a man to seek in for his belongings; but we'll find them for all that."

"Oh, there can be no difficulty about finding them," the Rector said.

It turned out that the Rector was wrong. Though each one of the many friends that Sybilla and Doris had left behind them at Courtfield was quite sure the others knew where the sisters now lived and all about them, no one, of their own knowledge, could give the information Robert Blake was in search of. He was obliged to return to town as ignorant as he had left it, and depend upon letters to addresses given him by the Rector, and on the enquiries he promised to make amongst those who had known the family so well only three years ago.

"It is extraordinary how they can have disappeared like this," the Rector said, as the two men stood upon the platform at the sleepy little station, and waited for the coming of the up-train,— "so well known and liked as they were hereabouts from all I have ever heard of them; it seems extraordinary they should have dropped out of sight."

"The way of the world," Robert Blake answered; what should poor people do but disappear? who cares to keep them in sight?

"Oh, come! the world is not so bad as all that," said the Rector; the girls must have had plenty of friends who liked them for their own sakes, and it must have been more or less their own faults if they have let drop all acquaintances here. I believe the eldest had not led a very happy life. She may

have wished to start afresh, and cut all connection with the past."

"I can understand there being some difficulty in finding them if she had any notion of that sort—a foolish notion, after all," said his companion.

"Possibly a wrong one," the Rector answered; "the ties we find formed for us are not ours to break, and I'm not clear those we form for ourselves on our way through life should be lightly broken; each brings a duty with it."

"Let *us* form a tie then; I should like to meet you again."

The eyes of Robert Blake twinkled with merriment beneath his shaggy brows; the Rector laughed; he shook hands warmly with this new acquaintance as the train came up. In a minute or two it had gone on through the closing twilight of the spring evening, and Courtfield station was asleep again.



CHAPTER V.

CLAIRVILLE.

“**M**Y sister said you wished to see me.”

Sybilla stood in Merton & Coghlan’s shop lit up by the morning sun that came in through the open door and shone upon the plate-glass windows with so much power that early in the year, and early in the day too, as it was, the shop boy was fixing the scarlet-striped awning outside. Doris stood watching him, and noticing the pleasant effect of cool shadow thrown into the back of the shop when once the awning was in its place ; and when the boy proceeded with a large watering-can to sprinkle the floor inside, and the strip of pavement without, she remarked to Sybilla that it felt like a summer’s day already.

The sisters very seldom went into the shop, though it was so near them. Once or twice the manager had recommended pupils to Sybilla, and had procured orders for the designs of Doris, and upon several occasions

had sold well for Sybilla the sketches which it was her holiday work to make on fine long summer days, when she and Doris wandered away together into the real country, leaving the little red house locked and a notice in the window, "Enquire next door," in case anyone should call in their absence,—a thing that never yet by any chance had happened, and Sybilla firmly believed never would.

Merton & Coghlan's was a pleasant place enough, full of the usual tasteful litter of prints and sketches, a study or two for chalk drawings,—the sort of thing a school-girl speaks of as "my copy,"—plaster casts of hands and feet, or groups of fruit and flowers, an oil painting that was for sale, lay figures large and small, the large looking like threatening ghosts in the dim corners at the back of the shop, the small in the window, where they presented the appearance of ugly-jointed dolls in great need of clothing.

On the counter lay a tempting array of pencils, smooth, shiny, and smelling sweet of cedar wood, and looking as though it were impossible for anyone, however ignorant or destitute of talent, to fail in producing clever and correct drawings with pencils such as those. There also were brushes just as skilful in appearance, colour boxes of all kinds, portfolios, easels, mahl sticks, every sort of appliance for art, all of which were for the most part sought after by would-be artists who looked to their tools to do a great deal for them, real workers generally contenting themselves with less show, and clinging fondly to

shabby portfolios and old brushes that, like the sling of David the young shepherd boy, had been already proven.

The manager came from behind the counter to speak to Sybilla. He was a fussy little man with red hair, whom for a long time the sisters had taken for the master of the shop and the owner of its contents. It was only quite by accident that Doris one day discovered his real name was not Merton, or Coghlan either, but Bunter.

"It is the principal, Miss Blake," he began now, while Sybilla, knowing from experience that anything requiring explanation would take Mr. Bunter some time to explain, leant against the counter and turned over a pile of drawings at her leisure,—“it is Merton & Coghlan who desired me to say—in fact to ask, they having seen sketches of yours, whether you would make a sketch for them—on your own terms, quite on your own terms, Miss Blake.”

“A sketch of anything in particular?” asked Sybilla.

“To be sure; certainly. You see, miss, there is a great deal of building about—new houses, new streets springing up in all directions, and old houses being pulled down to make place for others—an immensity of building going on.”

“Am I to sketch it all?” said Sybilla quietly.

The question startled Mr. Bunter into coming to the point at once. It appeared that so large a demand upon her powers was not to be made, and at last she fully



♥ The manager came from behind the counter to speak to Sybilla."

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understood that the private residence of Merton & Coghlan being doomed in its turn to destruction, what was required of her was to sketch it before this doom overtook the spot. It was an old house, in one of the old picturesque streets now so fast disappearing, streets where the houses were low, many of them half hidden by evergreens, and covered with climbing plants, all of them with gardens at the back where the birds built unmolested, where here and there a thorn tree blossomed in the spring. A good sum had been offered to buy out the present possessor of this particular house, but though the lease had only another year to run, and the houses on either side of Clairville, as the place was called, were down already, nothing, so Mr. Bunter said, would induce his principal to give up the tenancy until absolutely compelled to do so.

Having made a few enquiries as to exactly where Clairville was and the best way of getting there, for the services of the yellow tram would not be available on this occasion, since the spot they wished to reach lay in quite an opposite direction to that marked by the long rails of the tramway line, Sybilla agreed to undertake the work offered her, and proposed to Doris that, the day being so fine, they should go that very morning and enter into preliminary arrangements at once. A customer who had come into the shop was occupying the attention of Mr. Bunter, so that the sisters would have left without speaking to him again, had he not followed Sybilla to the door to explain that her name had not been mentioned,

and to write it hastily upon one of the shop cards which he gave to her by way of credentials.

"I don't understand my name not being known by people who wish to see me," Sybilla observed to Doris when the manager in his fussy way had hurried back to the customer at the counter.

"Some drawing of yours has been seen and admired, and little Mr. Bunter told to send the artist to Clairville ; it is as plain as possible, or if it is not, poor Mr. Bunter will never make it plainer," said Doris ; "besides I have a fancy for the expedition : I like adventures ; they are coming thick and fast upon us, Syb."

"I do not see how you can call this an adventure, or what other we have had."

"You forget your lodger !"

There was a little half laughing discussion as to what message should be left with the woman of the house next door, in case of this lodger making her appearance, and that matter being finally arranged the two set off.

Under the railway bridge, through which their way led first, the yellow tram was stationary ; the stables were in that neighbourhood, and a change of horses just then taking place. Sybilla, never forgetful of anyone crossing her path and seeming in need or want of any kind, seized the opportunity to ask the young conductor where the boy could be found in whom she had the day before been interested.

"A young scamp," the conductor said,—"here to-day,

gone to-morrow; how should I tell where he goes to, ma'am?"

"You seemed to know him."

"I've come across him now and then; he has done errands for a friend of mine—done errands for me myself at times."

"Has he no friends?"

"He made one yesterday, if I don't much mistake," said the conductor, smiling; "he is sure to turn up again before long; next time you take the tram I may have news of him for you."

There was no time for more; the horses were to, the tram started, Sybilla and Doris walked on beneath the blackened archway.

"It struck me the man with the blue bag meant to befriend the boy," Sybilla said, "and you see the conductor thinks so too."

"The man with the blue bag!" laughed Doris; "why Syb, it is of you yourself the conductor spoke. How dark it is here always on the brightest day, how damp and dirty; why *should* it be so damp? water drips from the bricks over-head; the fog seems always here."

"It is near the river," Sybilla answered; "remember how glad we have sometimes been of the cool shade of this spot on a glaring summer's day."

"I do not like it," Doris shivered slightly; "I do not like it even on the warmest day. It is as great a contrast to that dear little sunny home of ours—and they are

near together, Syb, lie close to one another—as the lives of so many whom we know are to our lives.”

“A fanciful notion,” said Sybilla, recalling painfully how dark a shadow had fallen across her own path that lay so close to that of Doris, and feeling the old dread lest her sorrow should sadden her sister also,—“a fanciful notion, and it is not like you to be fanciful. Other lives do not shadow yours; you live in the sunshine, Doris.”

“It would be poor comfort to live there all alone and see others in the shade. Happily, sunshine is a thing one cannot keep to oneself; it is over all alike—the sunshine of God’s love,” said Doris, softly.

They had come out from under the dark railway bridge, and were standing for a moment looking towards a narrow court or alley that opened upon the street just there, a court crowded with children, a dirty, close, wretched-looking place, but, as Doris truly said, the sunshine was there too—there, and on the mud down by the river, the mud in which more miserable-looking children were at play, and which could be seen from where the sisters stood together.

“We know so many sad histories in this place,” Doris went on, “and yet there is happiness here too. Even in trouble one may be in the sunshine still, while there is nothing between one’s own heart and heaven. The blue sky is above our poor old court; it is not bricked over like that dismal arch. If trouble came, I don’t think I should fear it, Syb; and that is a good thing, for not

even you, you know, can keep it from me if it is to come."

"Don't speak of trouble; you have known very little."

"And you so much."

"Why speak of this to-day, dear child?"

"All you told me yesterday made me thoughtful," said Doris, still looking up the dingy court, "and one thought stayed with me all night; this place recalls it now."

"What thought?" asked Sybilla.

"It sinks into my heart that the way of the Cross is sharp, and His Crown was a Crown of thorns; that those who suffer tread more closely in His steps than those who rejoice."

"That need not be, dear Doris."

Doris went on without heeding the words:

"You, out of your grief, bring a sympathy to aching hearts that I have not to give: I have only happy hands to stretch out towards them. Oh, Syb, having no sorrows of my own, I feel very sorrowful for them!"

"I will not have you sorrowful at all to-day," Sybilla said, gently drawing the girl with her in the direction in which their road lay, and which led them far from that poverty-stricken neighbourhood, into wide and pleasant streets, thronged with foot-passengers, and bright with sunshine. She would not have said so to her sister for the world, but the thought present in the mind of Sybilla was that hardly any feeling could be more Christlike than a

sorrow that mourned for the griefs of others only. Watching Doris, who was soon gay and cheerful once more, and looked the very embodiment of the spring day itself, Sybilla wondered whether it was because truly nothing came between the heart of the young girl and Heaven, that sunshine seemed alway on her brow, and in her clear, good eyes.

The sisters had some way to go, but what with taking an omnibus in one place, walking for a while, then meeting with another omnibus, that set them down at one end of the street to which they had been directed, they got there at last, to find the street in a perfect confusion of scaffolding, half-built houses, others spick and span new, looking contempt from their stuccoed fronts and smart venetian blinds at the crumbling ruins of old houses that had been pulled down near them. Between two such ruins, that were only half-cleared away, Sybilla and Doris found the house they sought.

A house of two stories only, built in the days when there was room and space to spare, and comfortable little homes might spread themselves out into their own gardens leisurely. Ground rent cannot have been high then, therefore building might be low and not "run up," as it seems is necessary now-a-days. Sybilla was not surprised the contractors wished to buy out Merton & Coghlan; Clairville occupied space enough for two modern houses.

There was a low railing in front, a small gravelled space, then a deep porch, from under the eaves of which

two small windows looked out each side the door. The most noticeable feature, however, and one that caught the eye of Sybilla at once, was a Magnolia that, grown to be quite a tree, stretched its thick trunk half across the house, flinging its branches round the windows, and seeming to caress the place.

"It will be a thousand pities when that Magnolia has to make way for bricks and mortar," she said.

"Do you believe in presentiments?" asked Doris; "this is such a strange little place. Hark! birds are singing in the garden at the back."

They had loitered on the way, and it was noon now. Groups of workmen stood together smoking their short pipes, or resting in the noon-day pause from labour, only now and then was the sharp sound of some tool heard; there was very little traffic in the street, so that but for the workmen it was quiet at all times; as Doris had said, the music of the birds filled the air.

"I never saw a place exactly like this," she went on. "I suppose it is the contrast, this old-fashioned sylvan-looking spot and the immensity of building round, to quote Mr. Bunter. Come, Syb, are we to ring the bell?"

They went up then to the door in the deep porch, which was presently opened to them by a neat parlour maid, who enquired their business civilly enough, but showed some surprise at seeing them.

"It is Mr.—Merton," Sybilla hesitated and laughed a little as she appealed to Doris. "I really don't know

which to ask for, or exactly *who* to ask for at all," she said.

"Both," said Doris, promptly, taking the shop card from her sister's hand and giving it to the servant. It generally was Doris who decided upon what ought to be done or said, and Sybilla who hesitated.

"From the shop; oh, certainly; you can walk in, ladies. I didn't know as anyone from Merton & Coghlan's was expected."

"We were asked to call," began Sybilla; "we were asked to call about a drawing,"

"Please take the card to your master," put in Doris.
The girl stared.

"Or mistress, if the master is out," continued Doris, trying to get a glimpse of the low quaint hall beyond the porch.

"Well, walk in," the maid repeated, apparently having come to the conclusion that the visitors were respectable and might be admitted without fear. She begged them to be seated on a curiously carved oaken bench which stood in the hall, that looked something like a little brown cupboard, for floor, wall, and ceiling were of wood, and disappeared herself through a door on the right hand.

"Why did you ask if I believed in presentiments?" said Sybilla, in a low voice, as soon as they were left alone.

"Because I believe in them myself; this place affects me strangely."

"Pleasantly?" said Sybilla.

"I think so; I hope so; it seems to me as it something was waiting for us here, had been waiting long, and we were come at last. Do you know the feeling, Syb?"

"Indeed, I do not: foolish child!" Sybilla answered, smiling, and glad that Doris appeared to find some innocent amusement in this fancy of hers.

"I am quite curious to know what it is," Doris went on, in a tone of suppressed merriment; "we have been three years next to the shop, and till now never knew Merton & Coghlan lived in a little brown cupboard of a place like this."

"Why should we have known it? It was nothing to us where they lived."

"That's exactly the point," said Doris merrily. "I am convinced it is something to us; that the result of our visit here is to be more important than an order for a sketch. How can you be so insensible to the influence of places, Syb?"

At that moment the maid reappeared through the door by which she had left them.

"Mrs. Bannerman will see you," she said.

The familiar name, heard thus unexpectedly, called the colour to the cheek of Doris, and Sybilla exclaimed—

"Mrs. Bannerman! There must be some mistake."

"You *said* from the shop," answered the maid, rather indignantly, as though suspicious of having been in some

way taken in ; "if you hadn't said it, I never should have disturbed my mistress."

"Oh, we come from the shop," Sybilla was beginning, when Doris whispered to her to follow the girl without further attempt at explanation.

"Let Mrs. Bannerman explain," she said. "I told you I had a presentiment."

"Only the coincidence of a similarity of name, I should fancy," said Sybilla, anxious at once lest disappointment should be in store for her darling ; "and I feel sure there is a mistake somewhere : it can be no Mrs. Bannerman who sent for me."

The maid, who, during the interchange of these few words between the sisters, had eyed them askance, and seemed more inclined to show them into the street again, through the hall door, than to precede them through the one she still held open in her hand, led the way, after a momentary hesitation, down a narrow passage, and, finally, ushered Sybilla and Doris into a room at the farther end.

The room was fully as old-fashioned as the hall. It was wainscoted with carved oak, there was no carpet on the floor, where a crimson rug, in the middle of the apartment, alone relieved the dark colour of the oaken boards. It was noticeable, too, that here were none of those pretty trifles and knick-knacks that give grace to other rooms, absolutely nothing, with the exception of a single picture that hung over the door, and which, to the astonishment of Doris, hung with its face to the wall,

absolutely nothing but such furniture as was required for use. A round table, a few chairs, a clock, and a pair of candles on the chimney-piece—to take the inventory of the contents of that room would have given little trouble. Owing, however, to this total absence of adornments, the eye was only the more instantaneously caught, the more thoroughly filled and satisfied, with the exquisite glimpse of foliage now in the tender hues of spring, the blaze of colour from bright flowers—crocuses, anemones, and the like—seen from the window opening to the ground, and giving access to the garden beyond. The window was wide open; through it streamed sunshine, flooding the sombre room with light; in the sun's rays, where they fell full upon a corner of the crimson rug, there basked a large white Persian cat. There was no one else in the room.



CHAPTER VI.

MERTON & COGHLAN.

“**H**OW odd!” exclaimed Doris, as the door shut behind the sisters.

“How beautiful!” said Sybilla, her eye caught at once by the contrast of rich green and golden light with the gloom of the sombre little room within which they stood.

“It is turned to the wall,” Doris went on, still looking at the picture, or rather at the back of it, which had attracted her attention directly.

“I suppose it is from the garden I am to make the sketch,” said Sybilla, advancing to the window, and drawing back in some confusion, as a lady suddenly appeared before it.

The lady was as odd as the room, and quite as old-fashioned as the house she lived in. Her dress, of some dark, soft material, was guarded by a large Holland apron, a straw hat surmounted the old-fashioned cap,

the border of which sat close round the face, a muslin handkerchief was pinned across her shoulders, and her hands, encased in strong leather gardening gloves, were full of plants.

"From the shop?" she said interrogatively.

Sybilla bowed.

"Perhaps there is some mistake," she began; "I am speaking, I believe, to Mrs. Bannerman."

The person addressed nodded her head quickly several times.

"Yes, yes, yes. What mistake can there be?"

"I was sent by——"

"By the firm," interrupted the old lady, though, indeed, there were few signs of age about her beyond the silvery hair, surmounted by the cap, the border of which made so quaint a setting to the shrewd intelligent face. "You were sent about the drawing; I know all about that."

"It was to be made for Merton & Coghlan, I understood," said Sybilla, hesitating, and a little inclined to resent the scant courtesy which left Doris and herself to stand within the window as the old lady stood outside it.

"I am Merton & Coghlan."

The odd announcement amused Doris; she could not restrain a smile, seeing which the mistress of the house continued rapidly:

"*And* the firm, *and* Mrs. Bannerman. I am sorry if the matter is beyond your comprehension, but it admits of explanation. My father bought up the business.

Having no one else to leave it to, left it to me. Bunter manages for me. It would upset the mind of the public, and divert custom from us, if the name were changed. Merton & Coghlan stand over the door still. What's in a name? Nothing. Yours is?"

"Blake," said Sybilla, smiling.

In spite of her last words it seemed as though there were something in a name, and a good deal in it too, for on hearing that answer of Sybilla's, Mrs. Bannerman appeared in some way strangely affected. Her colour rose, she looked indignant, surprised, hurt even; Doris, closely watching, could not decide which, or whether the expression on the old lady's face was compounded from all three emotions.

"Have the goodness to put your hand in my apron pocket and pull out the card," she said abruptly.

Seeing that Sybilla was puzzled by this request, and made no movement to comply with it, Doris, whose quicker wits saw at once the meaning of its having been made, since the hands of Mrs. Bannerman were not only filled with plants, but soiled with the mould that hung about their roots, stepped quietly before her sister and did at once that which Sybilla had been asked to do.

Once outside the window, the girl uttered a low exclamation of pleasure. She was standing in a little paradise of green, so secluded, so bathed in sunshine, so shut in by an old moss-grown wall surrounding the garden on three sides, that she could have imagined herself miles and miles from the noisy world of London, from the new

formal streets, bearing down everywhere upon this quaint abode, and ready to swallow it up as they had done every other green, old-world spot in the neighbourhood.

The exclamation of pleasure, the delighted look Doris threw around her, apparently interested the old lady, who, having satisfied herself that the name written on the card really was the name that had evidently awakened disagreeable, if not painful, recollections in her mind, yet turned her eyes upon her young visitor with a not unkindly glance.

"You like the place, then?"

"Indeed I do; it will make a lovely sketch."

"Step back; you will be better able to judge. The house on this side is not unpicturesque."

"Not unpicturesque! It is simply perfect. My sister will do justice to it: she will be charmed with such a subject."

"Then you are not yourself the artist?"

"Oh, no. It is Sybilla who is Miss Blake; I am only Doris, Mrs. Bannerman." Doris coloured slightly.

"You seem half afraid of my name still. Call me Merton & Coghlan if you like," said the old lady laughing.

"We knew some one——"

"You did, did you?" interrupted Mrs. Bannerman, who appeared to have a habit of jumping to the conclusion of a speech while it was still unfinished, and answering it at once; "and pray where, and when?"

She drew herself up stiffly, the old look of mingled pain and anger on her face once more.

"It was some one learning farming in our old neighbourhood ; I thought he might be a relation of yours ; the name is not common."

"Yours is," said Mrs. Bannerman, with great decision.

"Oh, yes, ours is a common name enough."

"And this young man you speak of, what did he call himself ?"

"Harold."

"Ah ! the other Saxon : there are two of them : one drives a tram. I know nothing of either of them—nothing. Nephews of my late husband, I believe. Now, with regard to this sketch—you live alone, Miss Blake, you and your sister ?"

She was addressing Sybilla, who had remained within the room, and had been not a little amused to see the conversation drifting into the hands of Doris, while Sybilla herself was half, or wholly forgotten. It was no unusual experience for her. Doris so often did, though quite unconsciously, take the lead.

"Yes, we live alone," Sybilla answered, though not exactly recognizing the right of Mrs. Bannerman to put to her that or any other question not having reference to the business in hand.

"And have no other relations, I presume ?"

"As good as none ; to all intents and purposes we are quite alone in the world ; but really, Mrs. Bannerman,

I do not see what this has to do with the drawing you wish me to make for you."

"It has everything to do with it," said the old lady, shortly.

"We *have* a brother somewhere," said the soft voice of Doris, who, as she spoke, turned a deprecating look upon Sybilla; it hurt Doris to ignore, even to strangers, the existence of Tom altogether.

Mrs. Bannerman stared at her angrily.

"You talk too much, young lady," she said with severity; "your sister is wise enough to know that discreditable connections should not be so much as mentioned; that people having the misfortune to possess such *do* to all intents and purposes live alone—*are* alone in the world—as I am myself."

"I only spoke the truth. We *have* a brother; and I agree with my sister, I do *not* see what all this has to do with the business we have come upon to-day, or why you should ask, or for that matter why we should answer, so many questions," cried Doris with spirit. She felt angry beyond words that this woman should coolly take it for granted that Tom was a discreditable connection,—a little angry, too, that Sybilla should quietly stand there and submit to be cross-questioned.

"There is another question, however, that I intend to ask, and your sister, I believe, will answer, before we proceed further," Mrs. Bannerman resumed with the utmost coolness: "did you ever meet anyone else of my

name besides this young man, this Harold, who was learning farming?"

"Never," replied Sybilla, not much caring whether the questions of Mrs. Bannerman were or were not justified by the fact that circumstances had thrown them together, and feeling rather amused than otherwise at the whole scene, while Doris thought to herself, not without a touch of malicious pleasure, that the old lady herself must have connections of whom she was ashamed.

"And whereabouts was it that you knew this Harold?"

"At Courtfield, our own old home."

The name evidently awoke no associations in the mind of Mrs. Bannerman, was evidently quite strange to her. She remained silent, gazing thoughtfully at the bright face of Doris, looking at that moment hardly the less lovely for the flush of indignation lingering on her cheek, and the little dignified demeanour she had assumed with her last words.

"If you have asked all you wished to know," Sybilla said at length, speaking with the gentle courtesy that characterized her manner when she was not shy or frightened, "will you kindly consider it our turn now, and tell me where Harold Bannerman is, and how it fares with him?"

"I know nothing of him; never saw him, nor he me. I doubt if he knows of my existence even, and yet—if you are curious, Miss Blake,—it is he who will be Merton & Coghlan when I am gone."

Doris could not help laughing.

"That sounds oddly to me!" she said.

"Oh, he'll sell the business and turn gentleman, of course; I may make up my mind to that; I shall not be here to see it however, and I have no one else to leave it to. Does that surprise you?" Mrs. Bannerman concluded abruptly.

"Why *should* it surprise us?" asked Doris, certainly rather surprised at the question. "And what about the other Saxon?" she added mischievously.

"The other Saxon, indeed! You catch up my phrases quickly, young lady. I told you he is on a tram: I know no more of him than that."

"The yellow tram, Sybilla!" exclaimed Doris, much amused; "I am sure it is the same. Is he Harold's brother? and why are they Saxons?"

"Were not Alfred and Harold the two greatest Saxons ever known? not that there is anything great about these two cousins, or ever will be. They are brothers' sons, but never met in their lives that I know of,—the worse for Harold if they do meet. Why people should meet at all, I can't think. They lead each other wrong, they bring trouble, sorrow, sin upon one another. If people lived apart——"

"But, dear me, Mrs. Bannerman!" cried Doris, breaking in upon the old lady's speech, as it was so much her habit to break in upon that of others, "the world isn't made like that; people *can't* live apart. If they do lead each other wrong—I fear that is true sometimes—they lead each other aright as well. They do, indeed. I've

noticed it so often. Even from strangers chance words fall helping one on in the right way. Of course we all influence each other, but for good as often as for harm. Surely I am right, Syb?

"You are young," said Mrs. Bannerman, as though that fact fully accounted for such a delusive creed, and Doris might be expected to mend in time; "and now, let us arrange about this drawing."

Sybilla, coming into the garden to consult with the old lady as to the point of view from which the sketch should be taken, was as charmed in her turn as Doris had already been with the beauty of the spot.

"What a thousand pities to lay this waste!" she cried.

"And to lay waste so much more than this—all the associations that have made it home. You are not surprised I should be anxious for a good drawing of it?"

"You would prefer my waiting till the foliage is in full beauty, would you not?" asked Sybilla.

"If I have the fancy to possess four drawings of Clairville, will you make me them, Miss Blake? One now, in spring-time; another when summer is in its prime, the elm thick and leafy, when the glaring new streets are hot and white, and the little garden cool, and green, and shady. Another again in autumn, with a grey sky, and falling leaves, and the grass grown long and rank about the old sun-dial in the midst; for why should I this year keep up the place in the late autumn, why *not* let the grass grow and the weeds spring? And the last in

winter, taken on some snowy day. That's what I want ; will you do that for me? Your style pleases me ; I think you could carry out the idea to my liking, if you tried."

"I will do it with pleasure," said Sybilla.

"We will have titles for the sketches," Mrs. Bannerman went on—"Hope, Joy, Desolation, Death ; it is the two last I shall be most particular about, and give you some trouble over, I dare say."

"I shall not mind trouble," Sybilla answered, her voice betraying the sympathy she felt,—“I shall not mind trouble, if to have such pictures will be——”

"Any comfort to me?" Mrs. Bannerman broke in, in her abrupt way. "Well, that is my affair."

"I do not wonder you are sorry to leave such a home."

"It leaves me. It was here my husband brought me when we married first ; here that he died ; here that my old father came to live with me, and died, too, when his time came ; here——" The old lady left the sentence unfinished ; her eyes met Sybilla's, and each seemed to read in those of the other how many tears they had shed. When Mrs. Bannerman spoke again, it was in another tone, and only to arrange for the first sketch to be taken as early as possible.

Sybilla suggesting that the changeable and treacherous days of an English spring were not to be relied on, and that it was wise to make "hay while the sun shone," Mrs. Bannerman agreed that the first slight drawing should be made at once, in the book Sybilla had brought

with her, and that it should be enlarged at home, in readiness for her next day's work at Clairville.

As the drawing progressed, Mrs. Bannerman and the artist grew friends. There may have been some truth in the remark Doris once made, that the chastened spirits of Sybilla rendered her quick to recognise and apt to console troubled hearts, for the two women seemed drawn to each other. There was no lack of courtesy either in the manner of the mistress of Clairville, after the first few moments when her abruptness had repelled Sybilla. The drawing finished, Mrs. Bannerman herself led her visitors again into the sombre sitting-room, where the white cat set up its back and moved its tail slowly, in marked disapprobation of the presence of strangers, and herself did the honours of a simple meal, that was laid out in readiness for them. Over this repast the three conversed amicably enough, and without any recurrence of the cross-questioning that had so much offended Doris, though both she and Sybilla were secretly amused to see that their hostess looked upon them quite as people to be patronised, and bound to be grateful for her notice, and for any employment she might place in their way. If this sense of superiority was somewhat too apparent on her part, she was so much their elder, that they forgave it easily. Sybilla, in particular, had become so possessed with the idea that some dark shadow had fallen across the life that had been led in this house that her pencil was to immortalise, that she would readily have forgiven worse faults than one of manner only. When the eyes

of Doris strayed, as they did frequently, to the turned picture on the wall, and when each time she noticed it, —and she was quick to notice it each time it happened, —a frown passed over the face of the old lady, Sybilla was more than ever convinced that, as she was fond of saying, there was a history here.

“ You will come to-morrow, then, or the first fine day after it ?” Mrs. Bannerman said, when the sisters rose at length to take their leave ; “ and will you come also ?” she added to Doris. “ You spoke a while ago of the influence we all had upon one another—I don’t know how that may be, but you do me good, young lady; if you care to exert as much influence upon a lonely life as that comes to, I hope I may see you here again.”

“ I do care very much. It is good of you to bid me come, so that I shall not be lonely while my sister is away, nor jealous of her passing a pleasant hour now and then in this pleasant place,” Doris said.

And then they went away, leaving Mrs. Bannerman to herself again, to the companionship of the great white cat, and the solitude of the low dark room, from which the sunbeams had withdrawn now, leaving it more dark and sombre than ever, and in greater contrast than ever to the bright garden beyond, where the shadow of the house just beginning to fall upon the grass added only a new embellishment to the spot.

When the sisters left Clairville at last, the masons and bricklayers were at work, the sun shone upon heaps of bricks and mortar, a light breeze blew clouds of dust

into their eyes, and Sybilla almost ran into the arms of some one hastily proceeding in the direction of the little gate and deep porch of the low house. She stood still in a sort of maze, watching this person who had nearly knocked her down, apologised profusely, and gone on again all within a moment, watching him until the door by which she herself had just come out opened to admit him, and closed again behind him.

"It is the man with the blue bag," Sybilla said then.

"Of course it is," observed Doris coolly.

"My dear! you never saw him."

"No, I never saw him, but it is the most natural thing in the world that he should be here. I am prepared for anything since Merton & Coghlan turn out to be a woman, and that woman a Mrs. Bannerman. Nothing will ever surprise me any more; it is not in *the least* surprising that the man with the blue bag—he *had* no bag by the way, Syb—should be at Clairville."



CHAPTER VII.

MAKING FRIENDS.

AND only yesterday we were speaking of the pig," remarked Doris, in a meditative voice, as the sisters walked slowly down a broad dusty street too unfashionable for water carts to countenance so early in the season, and where it was to be hoped the omnibus might overtake them before long.

"Yes," said Sybilla, "it was strange to hear of Harold in that chance way."

"Well," we did not exactly hear of him, you know : I wish we had, it is pleasant to hear of old friends,—don't you think so?"

"Oh, yes; still, after so long a time, when we have left the old life so completely behind us that it almost seems as though our old selves were left behind too, and we were other people leading other lives in a new place

it felt strange to have the past suddenly brought back to one by the sound of that name."

"But pleasant as well as strange, very pleasant, Syb," Doris insisted.

"We may never do more than hear of him, you know, and possibly not even that when these drawings are once finished."

"Well?" said Doris, to which remark Sybilla made no reply.

Doris spoke in a satisfied, comfortable tone, as though for the present, at all events, she had all she wanted.

"That is a strange woman," was her next remark.

"An unhappy one, I fear," said Sybilla.

"Yet she does not wish to break with *her* past," Doris said quickly; "she wants you to make a picture of it for her that she may keep it by her always. I suppose those sketches are to tell the story of her life at Clairville. But what an odd notion! And about one's past," Doris went on thoughtfully, "I don't believe we *can* leave it behind; it has become a part of ourselves. However completely one may wish or plan even to break with it——" she hesitated.

"I had good reason for wishing to do that," said Sybilla.

"You succeeded, or so it seems; but bits of the old life may come back to us at any moment; and don't you *believe* 'there's a Divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will?' All our plans are only rough-hewing, and I am glad to know it, glad to feel sure our

lives are ordered *for* us, and we have but to take from Heaven what Heaven sends."

Sybilla made no answer. She knew Doris was right, but the knowledge instead of bringing to Sybilla the sweet content and trustfulness that should have sprung from it only filled her just then with an uneasy sense of her powerlessness to mould even one young life, for which at any time she would have freely given her own, in the way in which it seemed to her best that it should be moulded.

"To think of the conductor of the yellow tram being Harold's cousin!" cried Doris, laughing.

"You are jumping to conclusions; there are other tramway cars in London: but, now I think of it, his friend did call him Alf."

"Of course!" said Doris, triumphantly; "and oh! to think of Harold himself ever being Merton & Coghlan! It does sound so unlike him. And, after all, I feel quite sure the picture *ought* to be the firm some day or other."

"The picture!"

"That which was turned to the wall," explained Doris. "However it is all wonderfully interesting. Who says life is commonplace? It is exactly like a three-volume novel, only one cannot skip the dry, dull bits, but must wade through them patiently till one gets to the adventures. *Our* adventures have begun at last, Syb! I told you so. I told you I had presentiments. Isn't it delightful?"

"You are easily delighted," said Sybilla, smiling. "I

do not see that anything very wonderful has happened to us yet, or is likely to happen." And then the omnibus came up, and for the time being conversation was at an end.

The rest of that day was spent by Sybilla and Doris in the crowded court, where they did the work of sisters of mercy,—a work that, without any fixed or deliberate intention on their part of making that particular court their care, had grown gradually on their hands from the time when the first case of distress they met with had been traced home to that place, and had thus been the means of introducing them to so many others. This work, as Sybilla had once truly said, was the life-work of herself and Doris. It kept their days occupied, their hands and their thoughts full. If from one point of view it had swallowed up the ideal little serving-maid, with cherry-coloured cap ribbons, and, with her, many another ornamental addition to lives once full of graceful adornment, from another point of view it had added a new beauty to them, and a luxury the sisters held to be above all others—the luxury of giving.

Whether in the sordid homes, where poverty and sin dwelt so near together, that surely virtue shone with the brighter lustre for the constant presence of temptation,—where the charity of the poor to the poor made life heroic, and the more heroic because unconscious of heroism at all,—where little children grew old before their time, and old folks dragged out uncomplainingly their last weary days; whether here the gentle sadness of

Sybilla, whose sorrowful eyes seemed to read instantaneously where sorrow was present in another, and her ready sympathy, that won confidence at once, and knew so well how to console,—whether this, or the bright presence of Doris, not the less full of sympathy because full, too, of wonder that there should be so much sorrow in the world, were the most welcome, it might be hard to say. The hearts of the poor creatures went out to both sisters; the prayers and blessings of the poor shielded the heads of both when they lay down at night.

It was late that afternoon when they reached home, and Doris hurried on first to reclaim the key from their next door neighbour, and stand ready on the threshold of the Red House to welcome Sybilla as she came up to it.

“Your little girl has not been,” said Doris, “but she will come, I am sure of that. I am convinced she is in the story in some way or other, and will come to-morrow, certainly. Mrs. Bagges says it is sheer waste to keep a room unoccupied; she wants us to stick a bill in the window. It is quite plain we have risen in her estimation since anything was said about letting lodgings at all. But how you ever could have said such a thing—what can have possessed you, Syb, I am at a loss to think!”

“She may not come,” said Sybilla.

And she did not. The morrow, and many another morrow came and went, and still nothing was heard of anyone who wished to see the rooms. The sisters by

degrees ceased to expect that any such person would be heard of, though Doris would now and then look a little wistfully at the small spare room, furnished with some of the old rectory furniture, and having a sketch of Courtfield over the fireplace, and wonder to herself how it would feel to have a lodger there—there in what she always called in her own mind “Tom’s room.”

The thoughts of Doris dwelt more often than Sybilla had any idea of upon this absent brother, almost a stranger as he was, so much a stranger that Doris certainly would never recognize him, nor he her, had they met anywhere by chance. She had a strong impression that Sybilla would be less sad were Tom and she to meet and to be friends. The pain of an unforgiven wrong must, Doris fancied, ache always with the dull aching of an unhealed wound. No thought, not the remotest, of blaming Sybilla ever occurred to Doris; she was very sorry for her, that was all. But then she never could help being sorry for Tom too. To have done wrong must be so much worse than to have suffered it, Doris considered.

In the changeable spring days the sisters went backwards and forwards to Clairville, where Mrs. Bannerman appeared to have taken a great fancy to them. On a closer acquaintance she proved to be by no means the reticent person Sybilla had at first imagined. The penetration of Sybilla may have been at fault, or Mrs. Bannerman may have been so drawn to her by the subtle sympathy existing between those whose lives lie in the shadow of

some great grief, that she showed herself differently to Sybilla—and for her sake to Doris, too, than to the rest of the world who moved in sunshine. The old lady had been quick to notice how much the very existence of Sybilla was wrapped up in her young sister.

“Ah! I know what that is,” she said once, “but take care; it is just the dearest hand that gives the deepest wound.”

“I am not afraid,” Sybilla answered quietly, and looking with a smile towards Doris, at that moment studying the quaint tracing on the old sun-dial which she proposed to use in some of her designs,—“I am not afraid that *my* dearest will ever——”

“But she will,” Mrs. Bannerman broke in; “I thought as you do once, and my experience had to do with my own child. I have seen your sister look at the back of the picture, hanging in the parlour there. She wonders why it should be turned facing the wall; I’ve read the question in her eyes.”

“You never heard it on her lips,” exclaimed Sybilla.

“The day some one my child liked better came between us she wronged me, and left me; it will be the same with your sister. Let no one come between you.”

“If I *did* wrong her,” said Doris, who had caught the words and now came up to the old lady, “if I ever did wrong her, Sybilla would forgive me.”

“There are wrongs that cannot be forgiven.”

“Oh, no,” Doris shook her head as she stood looking down at Sybilla’s drawing.

Her elder sister looked up at her fondly.

"There is no wrong I could not forgive Doris," Sybilla said; "and there is no wrong that she would ever do me to need forgiveness."

"So I thought once: but my child robbed me—me, her own mother. What do you say to that, young lady?"

"Do you mean—*stole*?" asked Doris, awe-struck.

"I do mean it. Stole from me to give to the good-for-nothing stranger whom she married. My child was a thief—not a pretty word, is it, Miss Blake?—but true, nevertheless."

"When did she die?" asked Doris.

Mrs. Bannerman flushed angrily.

"It is like you to ask that; like you to look at me so innocently, as though nothing but death ever parted parent and child. Your sister knows better than that. Take care of her, Miss Blake. I warn you to let no one come between you."

"Then, if she is not dead, there is time to forgive her still," said Doris, with the gentle persistence with which it was characteristic of her to pursue any object that seemed to her right. "She has sought for forgiveness, has she not?"

"Sought it that she might rob me again," said the mother bitterly.

But from that first mention of her daughter she alluded to her frequently, thus giving to Sybilla and Doris frequent opportunities of urging her to a reconciliation, opportunities they were not slow to avail themselves of.





“ While Sybilla drew, and Doris made friends with the white cat, the old lady talked fondly of bygone days.”

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From time to time, too, Mrs. Bannerman confided to them portions of her history until they knew it all. While Sybilla drew, and Doris made friends with the white cat or studied subjects for her illuminations, the old lady, busying herself about the flowers in the garden she was so soon to leave, talked fondly of the bygone days when she had first come there.

"It was but a poor house for my husband to come to," she said, "a poor place compared to that he was born in, but we were very happy here. You must know he was the eldest of the three brothers, and I only the governess of his sister. There was a great fuss made about our marriage, of course, or rather about our engagement, for I was not going to enter any family unwelcomed; by the time we were married there was no one left to complain. The brothers were their own masters."

"I am glad you waited," said Doris.

"Of course, I waited, and my turn came. The money had all melted away in some inconceivable manner. Though I was only the daughter of a tradesman, I brought my husband more than the fine lady-wives of his brothers brought to them."

"Was Harold's mother a fine lady?" asked Sybilla, reading the question in the eyes of Doris, and saving her the trouble of putting it herself.

"She was a lady, a good woman enough as the world goes, and his father was my husband's favourite brother. He was with us a good deal, but he died early, a year or two after his marriage."

"Harold's mother died, too, did she not? It was his guardian he used to speak of when we knew him," said Sybilla.

Mrs. Bannerman nodded assent.

"I never saw the boy, as I told you, and I doubt whether he even knows my name; but he will have all I leave, for his father's sake."

Doris shaking her head with a half-sad smile, Mrs. Bannerman asked her angrily what she meant now, but in her own heart knowing very well what it was, waited for no answer, and went on rapidly:

"Alfred, the third brother's son, I know nothing of, except that *his* father was extravagant, and finally ruined altogether, and, after his death, the boy had start after start in life, but fell into bad company, and now drives a tram."

"Conducts it," said Doris, laughing; "pray make the distinction."

"The child was born here," Mrs. Bannerman went on without heeding her, and suspending for a moment her occupation of thinning out the thick tufts of annuals, that were springing up everywhere in the borders; "the child was born here, and grew up, grew to be a part of my very self, stood by my side when I closed her father's eyes, was all I had in the world then, and crept down one night, like the thief she was, to rob the mother that would have died for her. But she had left me before that."

"Left you?" Sybilla repeated.

"They had been secretly married for weeks ; oh, she was here all the time outwardly, but my child,—*mine*,—had left me in her heart—as yours will. You love her too much," and Mrs. Bannerman fell to work again upon the seedlings.

"It must have been he who led her wrong," said Doris, softly.

"They had plausible reasons—the money would be hers by and by, and, being hers, his too. They meant to have told me the next day, or the next day but one. However, I found it out first—saw it ; watched her steal down into the room there, caught her in the act." She pointed with the weeding-knife in her trembling hand to the sombre room, in deep shadow now, within which the picture hung alone facing the wall.

"She must have been very miserable," said Doris, looking away from the bright, sunny garden in which the tale was told, to the gloom beyond.

"And what was I ?" cried the mother sharply ; "or what have I been all these years that have come and gone again since then ? I have never seen her face, nor the picture of her false face from that day."

"That is what has been making you so unhappy—and her too."

The voice of Sybilla was full of pity for both mother and daughter. "I think it is the saddest story I ever heard," she said.

Her sketch was nearly finished by this time. It need not have taken very long, but Mrs. Bannerman had

contrived that it should do so, and on grey unkindly days, when east winds blew, and the colouring out of doors was not exactly to her liking, she found work for the pencil of Sybilla within the house. Whole portfolios of water-colour sketches, and chalk drawings, needed mounting and preparing for sale, and no one, it appeared, but Miss Blake could do this completely to the satisfaction of Merton & Coghlan. With some few of the drawings, Mrs. Bannerman could not bring herself to part; they were the work of her husband, and their place was to be supplied by copies which Sybilla must make.

Since Mrs. Bannerman offered payment for her time, and since even had she not done so, Sybilla was by now so much interested in her new acquaintance, and hopeful of being the means of making her happier by and by, and since she was never inclined to turn away from any chance of making any one happy if she could, Sybilla agreed to do all the old lady wanted of her, and the sisters spent day after day at Clairville, going and coming so often that it was strange they never met again the "man with the blue bag," who also went and came very frequently that spring, but never, so it happened, when they were present.

Meantime, nothing had been heard at Courtfield, or elsewhere, of Robert Blake. The rector wrote once or twice to the address given him, but received no answer. He had not succeeded in finding the address of the sisters, though, as he truly said, there could be no insu-

perable difficulty in so doing—people do not mysteriously disappear unless of their own will. Still, as the rector remarked also, and with equal truth, it was not *his* place to find them.

“I should think not!” observed his wife indignantly; “from your description I fancied the man meant what he said; it appears he did not really care. Nothing but dead silence, all this time, in answer to your letters! Either he has found his nieces, and does not take the trouble to inform you, or he has given up the notion of looking for them. *You* ought to take no more trouble at all events.”

“I should not mind the trouble, but it seems hardly my place to interfere. I know nothing of the ladies personally,” said the rector.

“No; they are nothing to you,” said his wife.

The silence of Robert Blake was owing to the good and sufficient reason that he was lying at death's door in an obstinate attack of fever. He lacked neither care nor attendance. At one of the best hotels in London, with plenty of money about him, and every sign that, as the saying is, there was “plenty more where that came from,” it was not likely he would lack either. An enquiry at his bankers satisfied the proprietor of the hotel as to his exact duty towards his guest—and towards himself. That enquiry once made, nothing could exceed the attention bestowed upon the stranger, during those pleasant spring days when the angels of life and death fought for him, or later, when the struggle ended in

favour of life, and, very slowly, and with many fluctuations, convalescence succeeded to the delirium of fever.

It was well-nigh summer before Robert Blake had sufficiently recovered to be even aware of his situation, or able to prepare for the death he had barely escaped. He made his will then ;—made it in favour of his brother's children, but felt too weak, and as though he had too slight a hold on life, to trouble himself with any further steps.

"When I am gone, the lawyers must advertise," he thought wearily ; "let *them* take the trouble. I am neither fit for it, nor should I care to summon my nieces only to a death-bed."

With the languor and depression of spirits attending a prolonged and solitary convalescence, he still believed recovery to be impossible, believed it more firmly just as it became each day more probable. The springs of life, though not broken, were so bent and strained, they might take long to regain elasticity ; that they would do so by and by, the doctor had every confidence.



CHAPTER VIII.

AN ALTERNATIVE.



LITTLE beyond the railway bridge that threw its shadow on the road, before it stretched away and lost itself in the distance, and seemed to end, as is the case with most long vistas in and around London, in a church spire, there branched off from the iron rails upon which the tramway cars travelled up and down all day a curved line leading to the shed in which they were housed at night.

The roughly-boarded shed, with its strong doors open by day and locked only after midnight, when the two cars in use upon that line had been dragged home by the last pair of weary horses, stood back from the road, at the corner of a stone-cutter's yard full of sepulchral works of art.

Perhaps because of an elder tree growing in the open space littered with half-finished tombstones, or because

of being separated from the street by merely a low wooden paling, at the foot of which tufts of grass and weeds grew here and there, or because of the cottage-like house at the upper end of the yard, there was something countrified in the aspect of the spot. The elder tree grew green there early ; in summer the air was perfumed with the heavy scent of its white blossoms, and it was large enough to give a pleasant sense of shade when the sun glared upon the blocks of granite and the unfinished monuments.

There was scarcely ever anyone at work in the yard ; you might pass it a dozen times a week and find it silent always, and the only stir or movement in it that of the flickering shadow of the elder boughs as the wind stirred them, and the sun cast their wavering shadows on the stones. Yet work must have gone on somewhere or other, for the tombstones certainly did not finish themselves, and yet were finished and carried away in carts to suburban cemeteries, or, going further still, floated peacefully down canals through the pleasant country, or rushed there by rail, and were placed over quiet graves beneath the shadow of old churches standing in the midst of villages and wide fields and meadows.

If it was quiet always in this place it was at no time quieter than in the very early morning when the dawn was stealing slowly up the street, when the lamps were all turned down, all traffic stayed for a while, and only the measured tread of a policeman passing on his beat disturbed the silence. It was a good time for reflection ;



"He got no further than the low paling, but leaned there idly."

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not a bad place for it either, where those amongst the slabs which were complete stood in the gradually increasing light, and as it revealed the letters graven on them, preached a silent sermon. Whether such a sermon was more effective at such an hour or at some busier moment in the day when the eye chancing to catch sight of the yard which the elder tree and the tombstones shared together, the mind dwelt for a moment upon the thoughts suggested by them may be doubted. It may be doubted also whether Alfred Bannerman, the conductor of the yellow tram, was much given to meditations of any description, or was one to profit by them if he had been. Returning only now at dawn to his lodging in the house at the back of the yard, he got no further than the low paling, but leaned there idly, watching the light grow stronger and stronger, till the carved angel clinging to the cross, a group that had hitherto been one black shadow, stood out white and distinct under the elder tree,—till the black lettering on other tombstones might have been deciphered by sharp eyes,—till the sounds, quieted only for so brief a time, began again in the crowded court, which was close at hand, shrill voices of women and children mingled with the deeper tones of men,—till one or two foot passengers passed along the still silent street, which began now, however, to be awakened by the rumbling of a cart or two.

At last a milk cart rattled noisily by; at the sound of it the young man stood upright, and stretched himself.

The early milk always was a few minutes earlier than the first tramway car ; it was nearly time now for the other men to come up, for the horses to appear, for the day's work to begin. The children in the court knew that. One or two of them, for whom the daily starting of the cars was a daily spectacle, gathered about the entrance to the yard, and then a foot passenger—no other than Sybilla's man with the blue bag—appeared upon the scene, and, touching the conductor lightly on the arm, laughed at the start he gave.

"A guilty conscience, Alf?" he said; "or were you so deep in thought upon the end we all must come to, that my coming suddenly upon you makes you jump?"

"To see you here so early takes me by surprise," said the conductor.

"Your being here so early surprises *me*; or is it, with you, 'so late,' instead of early? Have you been home all night?"

"You must know that, I suppose; I am bound to tell you all I do, and you are bound to let her know. I am pretty well sick of it, James!"

The man he spoke to looked at him a little anxiously.

"I know you're a good fellow, you have done a great deal for me,—best let me go my own way now. When a man has but the hours after midnight up to early morning to call his own, it is hard he isn't to spend them as he likes, or with whom he likes." With the last words the conductor dropped his voice.

"Then you have broken the conditions," said the other quickly.

"What matter? they would have been broken in a day or two by no fault of mine. They are coming to live here."

"Here!"

"Yes; here I tell you, and by no fault of mine. I found the arrangement made when I got home a night or two ago, so, the bargain being at an end, I thought it no harm to look them up. This," with an impatient gesture towards the closed doors of the huge shed behind him,—“this leads to nothing; I have told you so before.”

"It leads to much; *has* led to more than you think of."

"How is that? If you have good news, tell it me at once."

"When you and I were boys together, Alf," began James Fane,—“when you and I were boys together, and started together on the same long race, we exchanged promises to help one another always.”

"It has been yours to help and mine to stumble," said the conductor bitterly; "I wonder you have not wearied yet of the one-sided bargain."

"How should I weary of it, remembering the playing-fields and the river where we bathed; remembering how but for you the water would have closed over my head, and I should be lying now—should so long have lain—under such a thing as that?" said James, pointing with

the cane he carried to the nearest and the ugliest of the monuments, and seeming as though he tried by the light tone of his words to hide a deeper feeling that underlay them. "You saved my life, Alf," he went on, "and that is laying a man under such a heavy obligation it takes a life-time to repay it. I have tried to help you—in spite of yourself, at times."

"You have helped me, often,—never more, James, than by the strength of purpose that has kept your own course straight, while mine has been so crooked."

"Straighten it," said James Fane, coolly.

"I've been steady for months now."

"I know it. And fate, that has made me your aunt's adviser, gives me a chance to speak for you now."

"To her? *This*," with the same angry gesture towards the shed,—"*this* is what she thinks good enough for me, and fitting for the son of her husband's brother."

"Yet you were grateful for her recommendation when she gave it."

"Starvation is a good school for gratitude," he said with a shrug of the shoulders; "I had nothing else to look to then."

"You have much to look to now. I have heard from your cousin Harold."

"What is that to me?" the other asked in some surprise.

"I have been in communication with him and with his friends—by her desire. You know she will not forgive,

and all she has to leave is to go, or so she declares, to Harold."

"Good for *him*," interposed the conductor.

"Bad for him, and for all concerned. You know I have my crotchets with regard to wills; an unjust one will bring misery as surely—as surely as, in any other case, we reap as we sow. Harold thinks the same. He writes that no persuasion will induce him to profit by his cousin's loss; he writes to his aunt that should she even leave him the money that should be her daughter's, he will at once make it over to her."

"Is he a fool?" Alfred Bannerman spoke as though he doubted his own senses, and could scarcely credit that he heard aright.

"He is an honest man," said James Fane.

"What next?" The young conductor had drawn nearer to the entrance of the yard; he stood with his hand upon one of the blocks of granite lying there, and the gaze he fastened upon his friend was full of eager hope, of curiosity, of a breathless anxiety he appeared to find it difficult to control. Instead of directly replying, James Fane said with an earnestness hard to be withstood,

"If I have tried to spend the life you saved, Alf, as it should be spent,—if I have said to myself, and said it to you too, that the service of God was the only thing to live for, I owe to you the being alive at all, and beg you to hear me now."

The other waved his hand as though impatient for him to proceed.

"To accept her offer, to write in any other way than Harold has written, would be to widen a breach we all try to close ; would be to do an injury to your friend."

"But Harold has *not* accepted."

"No ; Harold is a gentleman—as you are yourself," observed James, falling back upon mundane arguments.

"Go on ; I don't see the harm yet, neither do I see the connection of all this with my affairs."

"The harm is, that 'no man can serve God and Mammon ;' the connection with yourself, that, in the correspondence we have lately had, Harold has become for the first time aware of your existence, and of your circumstances, and offers through me to share his fortunes with you if you consent to go out and rough it with him where he now is. A week ago—even a day ago, that would have seemed an offer worth having, Alf."

Either some new and more brilliant hope had dawned within the last few minutes, or, for some other reason, it did not seem a tempting offer now, for the young conductor frowned and tapped the ground nervously with his foot as he replied—

"I do not understand why my name appeared at all."

James Fane drew a letter from his pocket.

"You shall see for yourself," he said, "what Harold writes—one moment," for the hand of Alf was eagerly outstretched towards the paper : "you saved me when the waters had well-nigh closed over my head ; if I could save you when other waters threaten you, I would grudge no sacrifice to do it ; and you were never so near

drowning in all your life before, so near being engulfed in a stream wherein a man loses self-respect."

"You are metaphorically inclined this morning! Speak plainly, James."

"Your aunt knows you have been steady for months now."

"What next?" the voice of Alfred trembled.

"She bids me—I am bound, as her man of business, to do her bidding when I can—bring you to see her."

Again the conductor repeated in a hoarser tone—

"What next?"

"She had, as you well know, a prejudice against you—a prejudice not wholly unfounded, Alf, your best friend must own that, your better self in your better moments must own it. Rather than Harold, he being in her estimation, as in yours, so great a fool,—rather than that he should have control of what she may die possessed of, or profit by it during her lifetime as had been her intention as well, she——" the speaker broke off with the same look of anxiety directed towards his friend as his face had worn once before. "You never did anything really dishonourable that I know of," he resumed.

"And you know the worst of me."

"I know you have been wild, thoughtless, foolish: I know an opportunity is yours to-day to be all you might be, or to sink in those waters I would save you from if it were possible. Come to Clairville to-morrow. Your aunt, rather than forgive her own child, and doubtful of you though she is, will take you into favour in the place of

Harold, who, mindful of justice and right, has refused her offers. The alternative—rough, honest work, with good prospect of success in life, but a success that must be the reward of your own efforts—you will read of here in your cousin's own words."

He placed the letter in his hands and turned to go.

"One moment : you are so hard upon me, James ! Why not trust me to do as Harold would after her death ?"

"Can you trust yourself ? And will you reject her favours while she lives, which may be—in all human probability, will be—for years and years to come ?"

"It is a strange way of doing her business—to bring me to her, having done your utmost to set me against her wishes first."

"I promised to bring you, under protest," said James Fane, laughing a little ; "she knows my opinion, and has known it all along. What was it, by the way, you told me of their coming to live here ?"

"They want quiet lodgings ; some place that is cheap and clean. It was no doing of mine. They did not even know I lodged here myself, but found out the rooms and struck the bargain, while I was chained all day to that yellow monster, the very sight of which has grown hateful to me."

"Well, well ; that is over now, in any case, whichever alternative you choose."

The sight of the other men and of the horses coming up the street brought to a close the interview between

the friends. The gates of the great shed were unlocked, the "yellow monster" duly wheeled out to the unflinching admiration of the group of children standing round, and the satisfaction of a passenger or two who were already waiting, and soon the jangling bells and beat of horses' hoofs were heard passing the Red House, where Doris and Sybilla, early astir as was their habit, nodded to one another at the sound, and remarked they were in good time to-day, for the yellow tram had only just now started.

In the intervals between his work, Alfred Bannerman found time to read and study his unknown cousin's letter; to admire and wonder at the frank kindness of the offer made; to agree with the writer that anything was better than wronging another; to be quite decided to go out and work his way manfully, and to change his mind fifty times in an hour, being tempted by the prospect of an easier life amongst old friends at home.

And in the intervals of *his* work all through the busy day, James Fane found time to think anxiously of his friend, to hope that the turning-point being come at last, honest independence would gain the day, and to be sure that, the effort once made, all that was good and noble in the character of Alfred would grow stronger, all that was ignoble fade away; to fear that an influence that hitherto had led him wrong might lead him wrong still; that the very friend who would apparently be injured, should Alfred decide upon accepting his aunt's favours, would find some underhand way to profit by

such a decision instead ; to fancy that, both her nephews proving high-minded and upright, one more step would be gained towards reconciling Mrs. Bannerman and her daughter, or at all events no new impediments would arise : and in short, between hope and fear, to have Alf and his concerns as much upon his mind as though he had really seen him struggling in deep water and was powerless to help, but must stand by in suspense as to whether he would sink or swim.

It was simply as an abstract matter of justice that James Fane interested himself in the old lady's conduct towards her daughter, for he knew neither her nor her husband. Had he done so, Mrs. Bannerman would have sought another adviser than the son of her old friend. As it was, she had a liking for the young man, rather admired the courage that never hesitated to say she was wrong, and found herself studying with curiosity the career of one who openly professed that the service of God was the one thing to live for, and openly and on all occasions acted up to his profession.

"Of course, you will advise those Saxons against their own interest," she said once ; "but that will do no harm."

"I had no right to advise your husband's elder nephew ; I know nothing of him. Mine was purely and simply a business letter. I think his answer does him credit. As for Alfred, I——"

"Of course, you will. I know exactly how you will caution him, and set him against my wishes."

"He is my friend," said James.

"It will not be a very friendly act to prevent my helping him on in life."

"I was very glad of your help for him."

"And he has done credit to your recommendation of him to me, and my recommendation of him to the company. You are sure he has not been near—those people since?"

"As far as I can be sure of anything, I can be sure at all times of Alf Bannerman's word. If he breaks the conditions of your countenance of him, he will tell me so himself."

"He's a ne'er-do-weel," said the old lady.

"He may do well yet; has done well for some time past; and you must own the yellow tram was a downfall!"

"A post of trust—as good a test as any other."

"And he has stood the test; you must allow me to say I hope he may stand your test as well. I hope he may refuse your offer."

James Fane looked up at the turned picture as he spoke, and then looked full in the old lady's face, who coloured, and turned her head away.



CHAPTER IX.

MARY SMITH.

IT was Monday morning. The charwoman employed by Sybilla and Doris to assist them in the labours of the weekly wash was up to her elbows in soapsuds in the back kitchen.

That the ladies should need her every week, although from a pecuniary point of view a cause of rejoicing, was also a cause of some astonishment, for such frequent washing of linen, to say nothing of the regular "cleaning down" of the whole house considered necessary by Sybilla, was a work of supererogation in the eyes of Mrs. Custers, albeit she was one of the cleanest women in the court.

She lived there all by herself in one small room, and just contrived to pay the rent of it by such work as she could secure. Whether she contrived to eat and drink as well was a matter of uncertainty from day to day, a matter which, while obviously one of vital importance to

Mrs. Custers herself, was of very little or no importance to anyone else in the world until Sybilla and Doris made the acquaintance of the charwoman by the bedside of a neighbour poorer than herself. This neighbour was not able even to pay for a place to live in, which clearly must be provided before the means of living in any place at all enter into one's calculations. However, since in this instance a place to die in seemed all that was required, Mrs. Custers was able to supply it, and as she never had refused to share her all, whether much or little, with any who needed it, so she did not hesitate now; the dying woman lay in the bed of Mrs. Custers, and beneath the shelter of her ceiling, which indeed just then was all she herself possessed. There Sybilla found her.

From that day, however, her fortune was made. Sybilla and Doris recommended her to their friends, and, fortunately for Mrs. Custers, they had friends who did not refuse to listen to the plea that though there might be many better laundresses in the world there were few better women. So the charwoman was in regular work, and looked forward to her half-days at the Red House as to one of the few pleasures of her life, for not only was there light labour and liberal pay, to say nothing of the comfortable meal, but kind words and pleasant intercourse with her employers as well.

"Was that the door bell?" asked Doris, pausing in her employment of sprinkling and folding the light things washed by her own hands before the heavy were made

over to Mrs. Custers, who also paused to listen, and then withdrew her arms from the tub and wiped them on her apron.

"It was the bell," she said, "which I never knew it to ring before, leastways when I was in the house. Shall I go to the door, miss?"

"Well, yes," began Doris, doubtfully—"or perhaps I had better see myself who it is." She did not like to hurt the feelings of Mrs. Custers, but anything more unlike *that* parlourmaid, as Doris afterwards told Sybilla, than Mrs. Custers looked at that moment it would be impossible to conceive. "I'll go," said the girl, pulling down the sleeves rolled up to her dimpled elbow, and taking off the large apron she wore over her fresh print dress, and looking instantly as though she had but to step upstairs to find herself in the pretty Courtfield drawing-room and to find *that* full of visitors: "your cough seems worse than ever, Mrs. Custers, and there is a sharp east wind. I begin to think you never mean to get rid of that cough."

"There don't seem much appearance of doing so, miss, and it doesn't signify greatly; which it is owing to the loss of my front teeth, and nothing else."

"Your front teeth!" Doris paused with the door in her hand.

"It causes such a draught, you see," Mrs. Custers explained. "I can't open my mouth without a draught of cold air rushing in; there's no likelihood of losing a cough under them circumstances."

Another modest tinkle of the bell hanging right over her head quickened the movements of Doris. Half expecting some message from Mrs. Bannerman, she ran upstairs, down the little oilcloth-covered passage, and opened the front door. A little girl stood upon the threshold. Even then, so long was it since Sybilla's adventure in the yellow tram, it did not at the moment strike Doris who the child was—a pretty child, with serious blue eyes, and very plainly dressed, yet with an oddly important air that sat upon her quaintly.

“Did you ring, dear?” said Doris.

The child nodded, or rather bowed her head in stately fashion.

“Is it a message?” the thoughts of Doris were still running upon Clairville.

“No ; I've come to see the rooms, but—you are *not* Miss Blake,” this in a tone implying that the young lady on the threshold was a person whom it would be very difficult to impose upon indeed, and that Doris had better not attempt to do so.

Doris, flushing and laughing,—in quiet lives small events are important, small interests engrossing,—stepped back into the passage, and called merrily up the stairs to Sybilla.

“I want you, Syb ; she's come at last !”

“Who has come ?” asked Sybilla, appearing with a dust-pan and brush in her hand, and her handkerchief tied over her hair.

“Your little girl—the lodger.”

As Sybilla, in her turn, approached the door, the child gave her a look of recognition, but at the same time glanced doubtfully at the dust-pan, seeing which Sybilla put it down, and took the handkerchief from her head, blushing a little as she did so, and with a sudden sense that this was the first time she ever had blushed to be discovered engaged in any of the multifarious housewifely occupations their change of fortune had brought upon the sisters.

"So you are come at last : you could not find rooms to suit you elsewhere ?" she began. "I had quite given up expecting you."

"Are the rooms let?" the child asked, eagerly, but on hearing they were still to be had, her face fell ; it almost seemed that she had hoped for a different answer.

"They may not suit, you know," Sybilla said.

"Or *you* may not suit us," added Doris, smiling ; "are you a large party ? The rooms are very small, and we have but two to let."

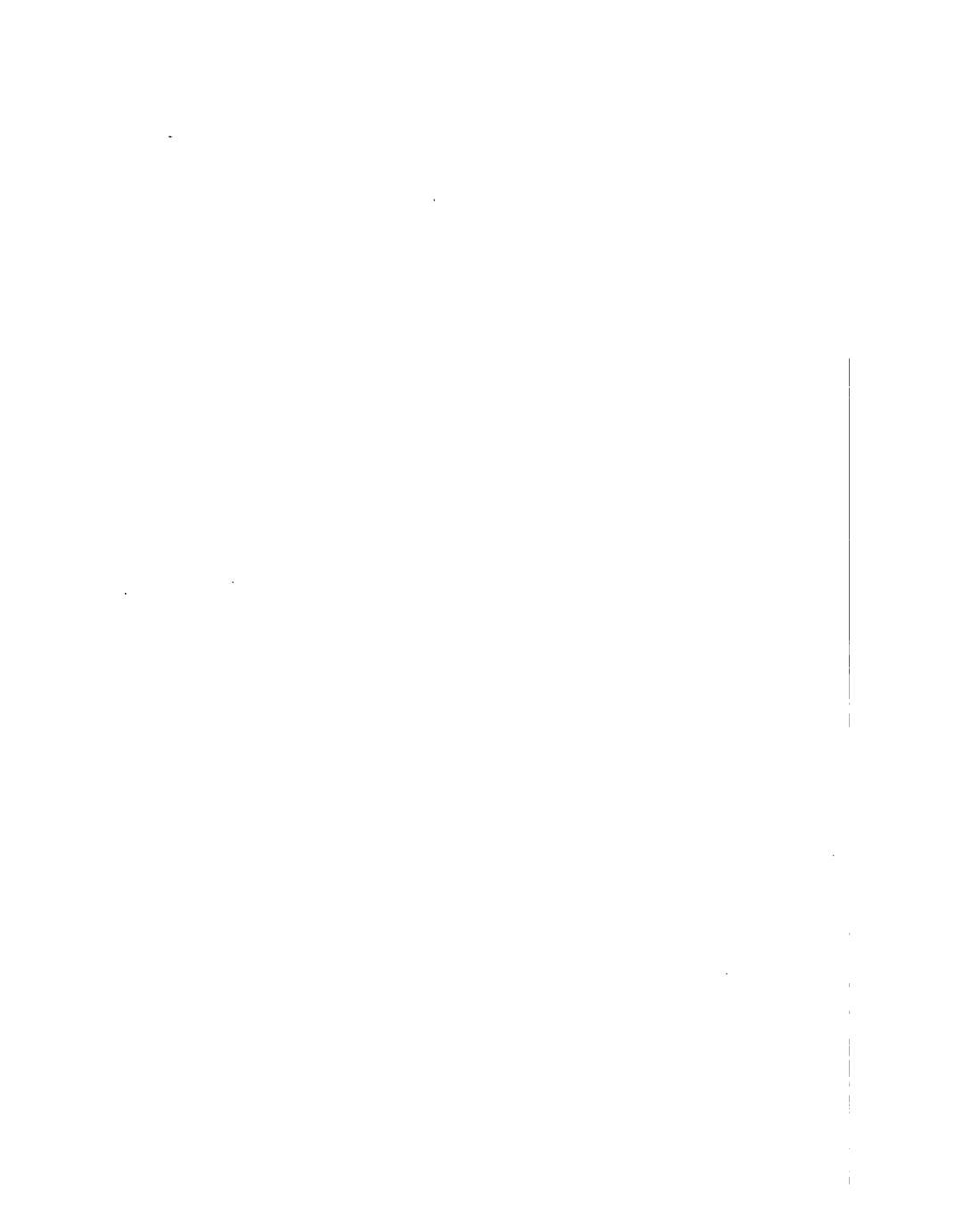
The child, with all her quiet self-possession, and the capable air she had, as though accustomed to manage the most intricate business matters every day, and take or reject lodgings constantly, appeared puzzled for a moment.

"I do not take up much room ; you might put me anywhere, I should not be particular ; and I am not large," she said.

Indeed she was not. A little creature, looking hardly ten years old, nor so much as that but for the intelligence



"" Are the rooms let ?" the child asked eagerly."



of the small, wise face. Doris could not help laughing at the answer.

"No, you are not large ; but how many of you are coming—or wish to come, if we are able to take you in?"

"There's only me."

Sybilla and Doris exchanged glances.

"You don't mean—you are not by yourself—you have a mother?" Sybilla by this time had the small hand in hers, but although it was allowed to remain there and the child looked up at her confidingly, there was not the less dignity in her reply :

"Of course I have a mother—and a papa too. They sent me here, or I should not have come to make inquiries. My mother is ill ; they are going away somewhere, and cannot take me with them just yet. For a little while—only a little while, I am to live with you."

"But——" began Doris, doubtfully.

"Hush !" said Sybilla, "there is trouble of some sort here."

"My mother is ill now, but she will get well," the child said earnestly.

"Give us her address : we will call at once and make arrangements."

"Twenty-two Mannington Villas ; but they are gone."

"Gone ! and left you alone?"

"I *told* you I was alone. I have explained everything exactly ; if you can't understand, either of you, I don't know what I *am* to do," exclaimed the young lady, withdrawing her hand somewhat hastily from that of Sybilla,

and turning her eyes from one sister to the other as though such slowness of comprehension was truly trying, and presented an obstacle that she was not prepared to meet, and was at a loss how to deal with.

"Oh, Syb! Syb! what have you done?" the voice of Doris was full of reproach, while a comical little elevation of the eyebrows betrayed her inward amusement; "it is evident what this is!"

"What is it?"

"Some unprincipled people want to palm off a child upon us."

"How can you tell? If we send her away, where will she go to?"

"Ask her."

The question being put, was answered by a sudden look of alarm, as though to be sent away was a contingency that had not at all entered into the calculations of this small adventurer, and by such a sorrowful "I don't know" as went to the heart of Sybilla at once.

"After all, a child is a great comfort in the house," she said to Doris.

"It is very strange, to say the least of it."

"How many strange things we have known; how many histories we have heard, that others, knowing less than we do of the sorrows and trials of life, might find it difficult to believe. The first time I saw this child—the only other time I saw her, I told you there was a history here," Sybilla answered.

"You did. I think, too, she speaks the truth; a little

creature of that age would not deceive," said Doris, her eyes reading the face of the child before her ; "a little lady, too, Syb."

"Evidently a lady," said Sybilla.

"She cannot be imposing on us."

"I am sure she cannot ; I am sure her tale is true," said Miss Blake ; whereupon the young person whose conduct was under discussion exclaimed, with startling suddenness and considerable emphasis,

"I am *not* a case of distress !"

"Indeed ! and, pray, do you know what that is ?" laughed Doris.

"It's a poor person, when they come to mamma and papa says, 'Don't be imposed upon.' I wonder you should say such things of *me*," with much dignity, and drawing herself up to her full height.

"Have you any—any *things* ?" asked Doris, somewhat vaguely, and looking round to see whether there was a box, or bag, or even so much as a bundle, anywhere in sight.

There was not, but the reply to that question was more calculated to satisfy the minds of the sisters than anything that had yet been said, and even held out hopes of light being thrown before long upon this exceedingly puzzling occurrence.

"My things are at the shop," said the young lady, indicating the blank wall beside her as she spoke.

Doris clapped her hands.

"The shop ! Do you hear that, Syb ? Merton &

Coghlan, again; Merton & Coghlan resolved to mix themselves up in all we do, resolved to get into the story somehow!"

Sybilla, who had been looking intently at the child and feeling more and more drawn towards her, seemed a little impatient.

"There *is* no 'story,'" she said; "you should not always be looking at things in the light of your own fancy, Doris, and trying to *make* a 'story,' as you call it, out of every simple thing that happens in such quiet uneventful lives as ours."

"And *you* should not look at things always in the light of your own compassion, Syb, and imagine trouble where there is just as likely to be only imposition. Besides, *is* this so simple an affair? A child like that sent to strangers to live in lodgings, all alone."

"We will inquire of Mr. Bunter, of course; children are never able to explain," said Sybilla. "By the way, will you tell us your name, dear?" she added, addressing her would-be lodger.

The child, up to that moment perfectly self-possessed, appeared suddenly seized with a fit of shyness, which if more natural to her tender years than her ordinary bearing, seemed most unnatural to her individually. She withdrew her hand from Sybilla, who had taken it again, and turned her face away to where the yellow tram was just then coming down the road towards them. For a moment she made no answer to the question that had been put to her, and the answer, whatever it was, when

she did make it was lost in the noise of grinding wheels and jangling bells as the car passed.

"What name did you say?" asked Sybilla.

"Mary Smith."

The reply came clear and distinct, but with it came an odd and rather startling change in the manner of the little speaker. It was not that she resumed, or tried to resume, her former independent demeanour, but, as though she felt that was about to fail her, she suddenly affected a confidence she did *not* feel, and stared up at Sybilla rather boldly, or with a glance that would have been bold in a child less gentle and refined. In the next instant, the little face was dyed with hot blushes, and she hung her head.

"Shy," said Sybilla, softly, "poor little woman! We cannot be more than ten years old—it is no wonder we should now and then be shy with strangers. I will take her round to the shop, Doris, and hear what Mr. Bunter has to say."

"Papa set me down there on his way; and he will let me know where they go to soon. Mamma will want to see me, you know, and hear whether I am quite comfortable."

"Come, this looks hopeful," said Sybilla; "this does not look as though she was deserted. However, I will be guided entirely by what I may hear from Mr. Bunter."

"Do,"—there was a merry twinkle in the eyes of Doris,—"be guided by that entirely. You can leave her there

'to be called for,' if you are not quite satisfied : indeed, I feel quite sure myself you *will* leave her there. Why should we be troubled with a little waif, whose mamma is ill, and who comes to us alone in this way? Mr. Bunter knows her doubtless; let *him* be responsible; I am sure you will not bring her back, and so——Mrs. Custers and I will prepare the bed in the spare room, and I will make cake for tea. You like cake, Mary Smith?"

Sybilla shook her head at the laughing girl, and walked off in the direction of Merton & Coghlan's entrance round the corner. She was fully resolved to do nothing imprudent, but to be guided by circumstances, which, however, with Sybilla generally meant other people's circumstances rather than her own. It was a disagreeable surprise that Mr. Bunter could, or at least did, tell her so little, though that little was conclusive, Sybilla thought.

"Oh, yes," he said, in his jerky, confused way, "it is precisely as the young lady states."

"You know her father then?" asked Sybilla, already half-inclined to take charge of the little stranger without further questions, the one thing that concerned her being that whoever Mary Smith was, she was here, a little child, alone, and come to Sybilla's door. "You know the parents, Mr. Bunter?"

"To be sure; certainly I know them, Miss Blake."

"And they are respectable?"

Mr. Bunter quite jumped.

"Respectable! Oh, decidedly; if a reference was

required I undertook to give it. The young lady's things are here. But I am surprised, Miss Blake, very—much—surprised—indeed.”

It was so easy to surprise Mr. Bunter that Sybilla did not think much of that.

“I understood that your rooms had been recommended to——” Mr. Bunter hesitated.

Not considering it necessary to explain that she had herself recommended the rooms to a chance passenger in a tramway car, Sybilla merely asked once more whether Mr. Bunter was satisfied of the correctness of the story told by the little girl, and hearing that he was, returned to the Red House with her new charge, the shop-boy following with a small trunk duly corded and addressed in a firm legible hand to “Miss Mary Smith, care of Messrs. Merton & Coghlan.”

It did occur to Sybilla, as they passed round the corner of the shop and up by the blank wall, warm now to the touch from the sun's rays, that fell direct upon it,—it did occur to Sybilla to wonder what instructions had been given to the child in the event of her being refused admittance to the Red House ; but the wonder went no further than her own mind. She asked no more questions just then, vaguely intending to speak again to Mr. Bunter at some time when he should be quite disengaged, and meantime to make her little guest welcome. It was quite evident that Mr. Bunter knew all about her. She could be safely handed over to him should it seem, on further consideration, wise to do so.

It was characteristic of all the parties concerned in the odd bargain struck that morning, that nothing had been said by any of them with regard to any payment to be offered or accepted. It was not till Mary Smith was comfortably established in the little parlour, and had, indeed, made herself quite at home there, by volunteering to dust the furniture, that, putting one small hand into the small pocket of her frock, she met with the packet of money that had been given her, and, bringing it out at once, unwrapped the two sovereigns it contained, and begged to know whether that was enough.

"Enough for what?" asked Sybilla.

"For the lodgings; I forgot to ask the terms."

"The terms are—what *are* the terms, by the way, Doris?" said Sybilla, laughing.

"I am sure I don't know. On the whole, I think Mary Smith herself is the proper person to tell us what they are. She has evidently much more experience in such matters than we have, who never let lodgings, or took them either, in all our lives before."

"Dear me! *we* have gone into lodgings often and often, more than twenty times I should think, for, of course, I can't remember about when I was young; but papa always paid, so I do *not* know the terms," answered the child, gravely.

"I am glad to hear he always paid," said Doris, aside.

"Will this be enough for board and lodging too, for a little while—only a very little while, you know?" asked the

child, earnestly ; and with a look in her eyes as though even a little time would seem long to her.

Mindful of the plain little frock that had not only been turned but patched here and there as well,—mindful, too, of how light the box had been when the shop-boy caught it up to carry it to the Red House, and of what a small box it was to hold all the wardrobe of even such a little creature as this that stood at her knee now, Sybilla answered without hesitation, and with a meaning glance at Doris, that the two sovereigns were not only enough, but much more than enough for a short time, and would last a very long time indeed ; so long that, if Mary Smith was to remain with her say only a couple of months or so, she, Sybilla, would hardly know what to do with so much money as all that, for no child, however large her appetite, could possibly manage to eat and drink it all.

Her mind set at ease upon this point, the new comer grew quite gay and friendly, helped in the housework in a manner that proved her to be well accustomed to such tasks, ran up and down stairs blithely, and herself unpacked and put away her few possessions, not after all in "Tom's room," but in a small one adjoining that of Doris. Before dinner-time it seemed as though Mary Smith had been in the Red House a week ; by the afternoon, when Sybilla sat down to her painting and Doris to her designs, the child might have been there a month, judging by the close friends they had all become, and long before night Sybilla dismissed the thought of any

further questioning of Mr. Bunter. As she remarked to Doris, the chief point to be considered was the child herself—and the child was there. Really, too, Sybilla could not see what more Mr. Bunter had to explain, and at the best of times, when there was nothing to be explained at all, he *was* such a tiresome little man to talk to.

“He knows a Mr. Smith. Mr. Smith looking for a safe home for a few weeks for his child, and being much hurried—we may be sure of that I think—remembers what the child herself told him once of someone living near the shop—applies to Mr. Bunter for a reference—sends the child here, with plenty of money—that is a great point, Doris, and disposes of your theory about palming her off upon us—and—in fact, and *here she is*,” concluded Sybilla, falling back once more upon her strongest point; “it is quite simple, Doris; don’t you see?”

“Oh yes; I see,” said Doris, not in the least less inclined than Sybilla was herself to keep the little girl, and quite as ready to see that to do so was the only thing and the right thing to be done.



CHAPTER X.

MARY SMITH AT CLAIRVILLE.

IT was a warm day in May when Sybilla and Doris took Mary Smith with them to Clairville, partly from not knowing very well what else to do with her when obliged to go there themselves, partly with a view to satisfying the lingering curiosity they felt with regard to their little lodger.

It had been of very little use to cross-question the child. Either she was too young to give a coherent statement, or she had not been admitted to her parents' reasons for parting with her; or, and that was what both sisters began to fear, she had been carefully tutored as to what answer to give and how much information to impart.

"It is unfair, after all, to question so young a child; we will have patience and see what turns up," said Sybilla, stooping to pick up a book from the floor, and to smooth the corner of the hearth-rug, and looking far

from ill-pleased at the signs here and there in the once tidy room of the presence of a child in the house.

"Patience as long as the two pounds hold out,—the money that is such a proof we are not being imposed upon," said Doris wickedly.

"Nonsense ! You know that you agree with me that it would be dishonourable to try and extract family history from a child."

"Of course, I agree with you," said Doris ; which may have been an odd way of looking at things, but these two had their own standard of right and wrong, even in trifles, and troubled their heads very little about the standard of the world in general. Still, being human, and, moreover, women, they confessed to a fair share of curiosity, and were not sorry of the opportunity of hearing what Mrs. Bannerman had to say of the mysterious Mr. Smith ; that she knew him neither Sybilla nor Doris doubted for an instant, or why should he have applied to Merton & Coghlan for a reference ? It was no cause for wonder that the old lady's name appeared wholly unfamiliar and strange to Mary herself, for, as Doris remarked, that Merton & Coghlan should *be* an old lady at all had been perplexing even to their sharper and older wits.

When they reached Clairville there was a gleam of sunshine in the streets outside, so that on first coming in to the low, dark, wainscoted hall, it was difficult to distinguish objects clearly. Sybilla, who had a habit of doing little awkward things so that Doris was always

watching over her to rescue her from small difficulties, let fall the drawing paraphernalia with which she was burdened—pencils rolled along the oak floor, a piece of india rubber bounded perversely into the darkest corner, and paints were scattered upon the door mat.

It was just one of the slight accidents which, often as they happened to her, never failed to put Sybilla into a nervous tremor. While Doris laughingly reassured her, and knocked heads in a friendly manner with the parlour-maid as they stooped to pick up the pencils, the voice of Mrs. Bannerman was heard demanding to know what all the confusion was about. The parlour door was open as well as that of the short passage leading to it from the hall.

"Who is there? Is that Miss Blake tumbling about in the hall?" called the old lady.

The maid being at that moment on hands and knees under a bench in pursuit of the india rubber, and Doris engaged in consoling Sybilla and replacing her paints, Miss Smith, who was never troubled with shyness, or at a loss what to do, took upon herself to answer.

"Yes, it is Miss Blake," she said, in clear childish tones, slightly raised to ensure their reaching the ears of the distant and invisible questioner; "there has been an accident, and we are getting things to rights."

Doris laughed.

"*You* are not setting things to rights," she said; "run in, dear, and tell Mrs. Bannerman we will be with her in a moment."

Mary Smith obeyed at once. She disappeared down the passage, and came into the dull parlour, through the door above which the picture hung facing the wall, but just as she passed from their sight, the sisters were startled by an exclamation from the old lady,

"Who spoke?—who was that?—who have you dared to bring into my house?" she cried, in a tone that frightened Doris and called the blood to the cheeks of Sybilla.

"We have done wrong, I suppose," said Sybilla; "I never imagined she would be offended at our bringing the child."

"Ain't you had leave to bring her?" asked the maid, looking up with a scared face; "no one don't come except from the shop, unless it is by appointment, or with leave asked and give particular."

"It is a pity: we should have mentioned the child; I remember now how loath you were to let us in when we came here first," said Doris.

"It's as much as my place is worth to let *anyone* in unbeknownst to mistress, so as to take her sudden," said the servant, still crouching in the corner, still listening for any further sounds from the room beyond. There were no sounds, however, or rather none more ominous than that of voices in low murmuring conversation.

"Never mind the india rubber," said Doris; "come, Syb, you are all right again now; let us go and apologise. After all, when one comes to think of it, I suppose it *was* taking a liberty to bring a stranger with us."

Their apologies were very graciously received in the sombre sitting-room, where nothing worse met their eyes than Mary Smith seated with the utmost propriety upon one of the stiff high-backed chairs, and conversing with even more than her usual self-possession with Mrs. Bannerman. It was a relief to Doris, who hardly knew what it was she had expected to see after that angry exclamation.

"I am not used to be taken unawares," the old lady said; "but Mary Smith—that is her name, she tells me—may stay now she *has* come. There was something in her voice—*only* in her voice—that startled me for a moment; and to tell the truth, Miss Blake, there has been no child in this house for so long a time——" She broke off with a glance at the turned portrait.

"We are so sorry," said Doris gently; "we never thought of that." Her eyes followed those of the old lady.

"Never thought of what?" asked Mrs. Bannerman sharply; "there is nothing to think about. Little Mary Smith may stay, may come again if she likes; she is living with you, I hear. Bring her to Clairville, and welcome—a child makes a place cheerful."

It turned out that Mrs. Bannerman knew nothing of any Mr. Smith. She held up her hands, and raised her eyebrows in disapprobation, when she heard the story.

"Some acquaintance of Bunter's—or some customer, I suppose," she said; "but what a quixotic thing to do! Do you mean to make the Red House a refuge for the destitute?"

"I wish it were anything half so good," exclaimed Doris, who always resented hearing Sybilla scolded. Sybilla never resented it for herself, but went her own way quietly. She only smiled now when Mrs. Bannerman went on to prophesy that the sisters were saddled for life with Mary Smith, would have to bring her up, clothe, feed, educate, and finally get her married, with no other help than the miserable two sovereigns the child had brought with her.

"To talk of getting her married is looking very far forward," Sybilla said ; "and you forget that Mr. Bunter knows her people."

"Some chance customer, that is all, you may depend upon it. Do you imagine every tradesman considers himself personally responsible for the respectability of everyone who deals with him, and may therefore use his name as a reference, or ask for one from him? You have made a mistake. She seems a nice child, however."

The little girl had been sent into the garden ; her small figure could be seen moving about there amongst the flowers ; the Persian cat, who never would allow Doris to make friends with her, appeared to have adopted the new comer at once, and walked beside her with arched back, and now and then rubbed up against her affectionately. When they ceased speaking in the parlour, Mary Smith's voice could be heard in conversation with the cat.

"I like this place, pussie ; I think I have been here before : it was in my dreams, you know, not in my real

life ; and you were in my dream too, puss," the child was saying. By-and-by, when she had moved out of sight, they heard her still, and then Mrs. Bannerman called to her sharply to keep where she could be seen from the window.

"I cannot stand hearing her and not seeing her," she said ; "the voice—only the voice—is more than I can bear. Perhaps because it is a child's voice, you know."

"I did not know children sometimes had that odd feeling of being familiar with a place really seen for the first time," observed Doris.

"It is a common feeling enough," said Mrs. Bannerman, still watching the little figure that flitted here and there amongst the flowers.

"You were right in thinking her a nice child. She has done us good already," Doris went on.

"Rubbish ! you wanted no good done to you."

"Indeed we did ! In particular, I foresee that Mary Smith will save Syb from a fate I began to dread for her. And that you dreaded for her, too. You say, so often, that she is too much wrapped up in me ; now she already neglects me for little Mary."

"Doris !" Sybilla, occupied in arranging the drawings she was mounting, and which were spread over a large table in the corner of the room, held up her finger warningly.

"She does, indeed. She creeps in the last thing at night to kiss Mary in her bed ; she leaves me to wash up

the breakfast things alone, while she hears Mary read ; when there was but one fresh egg in the house, she suggested, not that *I* should have it, but that Mary should. I never was more surprised in all my life than I was about that egg."

"You absurd child," Sybilla said, while Mrs. Bannerman laughed at them both.

"Then," Doris went on, "we were both growing too tidy, too prim, too altogether old maidish. Oh, you don't know the good a child in the house will do us ; why, Mary has broken a cup, and knocked over a chair, and fallen down stairs already ! When do Syb or I knock over chairs in jumping up to look out of the window ? I feel years younger since Mary Smith came to us."

"Has she heard from her parents yet ?"

"Well, no," Doris was compelled to admit that she had not.

"And she will not ; mark my words—she will never hear from them," said Mrs. Bannerman.

"But that is a mistake," said an earnest little voice from the open window ; the child had overheard those last words, and now with grave politeness contradicted them : "that is a mistake, because mamma and papa promised to let me know when I could go and see them. They will not forget—they *cannot* forget, you know."

"Why not ?" the old lady asked.

"I belong to them : they love me,"—the eyes were very wistful, but had no shadow of doubt in them,—
"even if I was very naughty they would love me. You



“‘ You see, you haven’t got a little girl, and you don’t know about it.’”

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have not got a little girl, so you don't know about it; but *I* know," said little Mary.

"I would advise you *not* to be very naughty, or you will find no one, not even your parents, will love you or wish to see you," said Mrs. Bannerman, trying to appear unconscious of the application Doris was making of the child's words. "Parents leave off loving children who do wrong."

"Oh, no," said the child smiling; "it's not polite to contradict; but you see, you haven't got a little girl, and you don't know about it."

There was either something unusually winning about this child, with her quaint, self-possessed manner mingling so oddly with the childishness natural to her years, with the strong affection she already manifested toward Sybilla and Doris, and the grave politeness with which she treated Mrs. Bannerman, or else, as Doris half suspected, the presence of a child at Clairville softened the heart of the old lady, for before the day was over she had taken so great a fancy to Mary Smith that she desired Sybilla to bring her whenever she came herself.

"I suspect she would regret it as much as we should if Mr. Smith were to turn up and claim her," remarked Doris, as the sisters went home that evening.

"Should you regret it?" asked Sybilla.

"Should you?" said Doris.

"Of course he *will* claim her; you spoke almost as though you thought it doubtful."

"I don't know what to think," said Doris: "but at

all events it is plain she was wanted here, and has come to the right place."

"I have no doubt as to her having come to the right place," answered Sybilla, her eyes resting upon the little girl as she walked on before; "so young, so innocent and trustful, Doris, the Providence that watches over little children would take care of that; but how is she wanted here? You see things more quickly than I do, dear. Tell me what is this child's work amongst us here?"

"To satisfy your tender heart, Syb, and fill it by the constant presence in your home of one you are good to and are caring for. The others come and go—how far sometimes out of our sight and ken! But her you may keep always with you, and make happy all day long. And then, surely you see she has been sent to soften the heart of that strange old woman, and by recalling the memory of her own daughter's childhood, do far more than ever we could do towards the end we have set ourselves to work for at Clairville? Oh! I *know* we all have messages to each other, and never meet by chance! The message of our little lodger is one of peace, I feel quite sure of that."

"We will hope it is so," said Sybilla smiling; "a dove that has sought shelter with us from the world, and is to bear an olive branch from our poor little ark."

"*That's* a fine jumble of ideas," cried Doris, seizing the hand of Mary Smith as they crossed over the crowded street; "the olive branch was borne *to* the ark, not from it, Syb."

From that day Mary Smith was as constant a visitor at Clairville as the sisters themselves. "It was a particularly pleasant place," she informed Doris, and to go there was quite as good as going into the country. As for the mistress of Clairville, if Mary could have been spoiled, Mrs. Bannerman would have spoiled her. Indeed, as the bright May days followed one another, the young lady began to tyrannize over the old one. For Mary old drawers and cupboards were turned out, yielding all sorts of treasures, in the shape of old-fashioned dresses, broken fans, queer-shaped scent bottles, a perfect rainbow of pieces for patchwork, and wonderful little boxes of all sorts and sizes ; for Mary the choicest flowers were gathered, the choicest little meals prepared. She was soon no longer under the delusion that her new friend had never had a little girl of her own,—the large doll discovered in the wardrobe would of itself have betrayed the secret,—and the sisters counted it as one step gained when the old lady began to tell anecdotes of her daughter's childish days to this small listener, although the stories always ended with—

"She was a bad girl to me when she grew up."

"I will never be bad to my mother," the child said one day.

"She is a long time without writing to you."

"Is four weeks long?" Mary asked, showing by the question what exact note she had taken of the time; "perhaps my mother is not better enough to write yet. She will send for me quite suddenly some day; then she

will be glad to know my friends ; I will bring her to see you at once."

"Pray do," said Mrs. Bannerman, graciously.

"I hope she will find me improved. Do you know my great wish?"

"Tell it me."

Sybilla paused in her work to listen to the talk between the old lady and the child standing at her knee.

"My wish is to be very, very good. I think it is a dreadful thing to be so bad that your mother will not see your face, and turns your picture to the wall. It puts a pain in my heart when I look at that picture."

"There was a pain in my heart when I turned it."

"Is the pain there now?"

"It will never leave me."

"Not if you were to turn the picture round again?"

"I shall never do that."

"I do so want to see it."

"Little girls should not be curious," said Mrs. Bannerman.

"It is not curiosity—I think it is heartache," answered the child, looking up, as she often did, at the back of the portrait.

"Well, child, mind you do grow 'very, very good,' and never break *your* mother's heart."

Mary Smith rested both elbows on the knee of the old lady, and gazed up into her face ; the child's brow was puckered into an anxious frown.

"*Can* a person be very, very good who does just *one*

little wrong thing—only one, and because someone *much* gooder than themselves bids them do it?" she said.

"*Nothing* can make wrong right," said Doris, who was leaning over the old lady's chair.

There was a moment's silence, after which Mary, with a heavy sigh, remarked that it was a pity there were not names enough in the world,—a remark which sounded to Doris so irrelevant to all that had gone before that she laughingly asked the child on what her head was running now.

"Oh, nothing; only a tangle in my mind. It is hard a person cannot be very good when they wish it so much, and it is a great misfortune when people have the same names."

"What are you thinking of?" Doris exclaimed again. "I don't see that it is a misfortune."

"In the course of my life I have noticed that it *is*," observed Miss Smith, sedately. and there the conversation dropped for that time.

It had suggested to Sybilla, however, that her little charge pined for her mother more than had been supposed: Sybilla decided to speak to Mr. Bunter and find out once for all how much or how little he knew of the child's parents.

"It will not do to go on so," she said to Doris; "I have noticed tears on her cheeks at night lately—I fear she cries herself to sleep. Poor little loving heart! We will go round to the shop to-morrow, and cross-question Mr. Bunter."

But the events of that very evening had the effect of changing Miss Blake's mind. She did *not* go to the shop next day, and Mr. Bunter was never questioned any more at all with regard to Mary Smith.



CHAPTER XI.

A TROUBLED CONSCIENCE.

CERTAINLY little Mary was crying herself to sleep that night, Doris thought, as passing the half-closed door of the room where the child slept sounds of woe were distinctly audible. Doris pushed open the door and went in.

There was no other light in the room than that falling through the window from the lamp-lit street without, for the blind was never pulled down till Doris came to bed herself, but this light served to show the little creature in its white dress, sitting up like a sorrowful little ghost upon the pillow, and wringing two small hands in very evident distress, which, however, Mary made an effort to conceal when Doris entered and, bending over her, asked tenderly what ailed her to make her sob like that.

"Troubles ; and my conscience pricks me," the child said at last.

"That is a trouble easily set at rest ; confess what you

have done wrong, darling ; be forgiven, say a little prayer, and go peacefully to sleep."

"Oh, if I could, if I could ! But is it confessing to tell the sort of wickedness you did, and not just exactly how it happened ?" asked Mary, too much in earnest for tears as she propounded the nice case of conscience, and looking so woe-begone that it made the heart of Doris ache to see her.

"I hardly know how to answer you," Doris said. "Can't you tell me everything ?"

"If I could I should not sit here crying in the night."

"You would tell your mother."

"That is absurd," said the child, who was always more at her ease with Doris than with Sybilla, whom from the first Mary Smith had seemed to recognize as the head of the house ; "that is absurd ; people can tell mothers everything of course, and, besides, she would understand without telling. I want her, Miss Doris ! Every morning when I wake I say to myself 'to-day,' and then I feel happy ; but night comes, and I cry. I know she wants me dreadfully. I can't think who takes care of her and does things for her now."

"Your father," suggested Doris.

"Ah, but while he is away at the office. When she is alone mother gets low-spirited ; I am sure I do too. The world is a low-spirited place I think," sighed the child ; "and it is not a little time, but a long, long time, that they have left me here."

"The longer the time has been, why the sooner we



“ ‘The world is a low-spirited place, I think,’ sighed the child.”

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shall hear now," said Doris, speaking more confidently than she felt ; " you must not fret and be unhappy, dear."

"Unhappiness doesn't matter ; wickedness is worse," said the child, drearily ; " you said to-day that *nothing* can make wrong right ; you know you did—and there is a weight here," pressing two small hands upon her heart.

"Confession and repentance can right wrong-doing," said Doris, wondering what childish fault had brought about this agony of self-reproach ; " I am sure in your own home you were naughty now and then like other children, and like them forgiven when you repented. Grown-up people expect children to be naughty sometimes."

"It is different. You don't know what you are talking about ; this trouble would not have come at home," with an impatient movement of the shoulders under the white night dress.

"Let me call Syb."

The small hand holding the dress of Doris clasped it more tightly.

"No, no—she is so *very* good, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is good, but good people are always ready to forgive."

"Not *all* good people ; Mrs. Bannerman will not forgive her little girl."

"The little girl, as you call her, is grown up ; everyone is ready to forgive a child."

The confession came then, in a voice so strangled with sobs Doris could hardly hear it :

"I said something that was not true."

"When, dear! what about? don't cry so, Mary."

But Mary cried more than ever, cried so much that Doris could only try to comfort her, assure her of forgiveness, and though not a little curious as to the particular falsehood that had caused all this distress, refrain from any further questioning just then.

"I am so *dreadfully* ashamed," sobbed Mary, and Doris felt no surprise at that, for the little girl had proved herself singularly truthful in word and deed, so that to have failed in that particular might well occasion the agony of shame that seemed to overwhelm her now.

"You shall tell us all about it in the morning, dear; go to sleep, now, and believe you are quite, quite forgiven," Doris said; she felt no inclination to lecture or preach a sermon to this small penitent, who, indeed, in the depth of her contrition was preaching one unconsciously to Doris, but left her to forget her troubles in sleep. The last Doris saw of her as she looked back on leaving the room, was the little white figure kneeling with clasped hands in its bed; from some strange effect of the lamplight outside, or from some momentary association of ideas, Doris was reminded of one of the figures in the stonemason's yard, which she passed every day.

"Such a tender conscience!" she said to Sybilla when telling her the story downstairs; "I wonder what little fib it was she told. It makes one feel wicked oneself to see a childish fault repented of like that. She has been carefully brought up, Syb."

"Yes; that is evident. I should say her mother was a good woman."

"Or her father a good man. She has an odd little protecting way of speaking of her mother, as though Mary herself were the leading spirit there. She seems to look up to her father."

"Why should they not both be good?" said Sybilla smiling.

"I wonder what the trouble can have been that obliged them to part with her," observed Doris thoughtfully; "we seem to have no clue to it yet; nothing she has from time to time let fall of her own home, and her home life, has given us any clue. To sum it all up, after one whole month, what is it that we do know of little Mary Smith?"

"That her father is an architect, judging by what she said of plans and drawings——"

"Or a sculptor," interrupted Doris; "remember when we passed the stonecutter's yard with her for the first time, she told us the figure of the angel was not so beautiful as those her father made. Then we know the mother is an invalid, that there are no other children, that they are evidently poor, and lived in Manchester for many years before they came to live in London. That is about all we do know, Syb, is it not?"

"All we know *about* her," answered Sybilla, "but of her, Doris, we know much more than that—all we need know. For here she is beneath our roof, and for the time being with no other friend but ourselves. A little

waif, a little homeless child, innocent and good. To hear her say her prayers, to see the look of childlike reverence on her face when she kneels in church beside us, to mark how tractable she is, and how close to one another in her heart are heavenly and earthly things, makes me feel that we took a blessing within our doors when we took her in that day four weeks ago."

"She is a dear little creature," exclaimed Doris warmly, "but for her own sake we will try and learn something of Mr. Smith to-morrow."

"Decidedly we will," said Sybilla, though in her secret soul beginning to look upon the mysterious Mr. Smith as a natural enemy, who might appear at any moment and rob her of the child she had learnt to love.

It was rather later than usual when they went upstairs that night, and Sybilla stole to the bedside to pay her usual visit to the sleeping child. Doris followed her sister. The bed-clothes were tumbled, the little tear-stained face was hot and flushed, but the small sinner was sound asleep now, so sound asleep that neither the light Sybilla carried nor the whispering voices of the sisters roused her even for a moment.

Sybilla was in the act of stooping to kiss the cheek upon the pillow when her eye was caught by a locket the child always wore round her neck beneath her frock, and which was now lying on the floor near the bed. Sybilla picked it up.

"You must have trodden on it, Doris, while you stood talking to her," she whispered; "see, the spring is broken."

"I wonder she should have let it fall, she is generally so careful of it," Doris answered; "I never saw it open before. Her father, I suppose."

Doris looked over the shoulder of Sybilla, who held the locket in her hand.

"A nice face, a good-humoured handsome face," Doris went on, "but oddly unlike little Mary Smith herself."

Sybilla never spoke, the hand in which she held the trinket trembled.

"It is like someone I know, too," continued Doris; "how provoking these chance likenesses are that flit before one like a dream, and to which one cannot give a name! How one's thoughts dwell upon the subject, until suddenly the right person is remembered! I shall be haunted by that face all night. Who *is* it like?"

Still Sybilla was quite silent.

"We will get it mended for her to-morrow," said Doris. "Take care, Syb! you are letting the light fall full upon her eyes."

Sybilla moved then; she laid the locket on the table and went towards the door.

"You have not kissed her," whispered Doris in some surprise; "are you afraid of waking her? You will not do that; she is sleeping so heavily. Poor little soul, tired out with weeping over her sins. How many of us, however truly we repent, can say the same? The penitence of a child is very touching, Syb."

Sybilla seemed hardly to hear her sister, though she

waited for a moment at the door, and yet went away without kissing little Mary after all. It was not till, in her own room, she turned towards Doris to say good night, that Doris noticed and exclaimed at the paleness of Sybilla's face.

"You are ill! What is it, Syb? You look as if you had seen a ghost."

"Perhaps I have," answered Sybilla, trying to smile and pleading guilty to a violent headache, which she declared had been coming on all day. A night's rest was all that was wanted, she said, and Doris, though only half satisfied, left her at last and passed back through the room of little Mary to her own.

The child had not stirred, and it was not long before Doris, whose heart was as light and whose conscience was as tender as a child's, slept also. But if a night's rest was to be the cure for the headache of Sybilla there was little chance of its being cured at all. At this season the tramway cars ran up to midnight, but long past midnight, and long after she had heard the last of them go jangling by, Sybilla was still wide awake.

Away in the stone-cutter's yard the night air moved the branches of the elder tree, and the lamp light from the street fell upon the stone angel clinging to the cross, fell too upon the lattice panes of the window of the cottage-like house at the back of the yard, fell upon the huge shed waiting to receive the cars, and shone into the open door of it and upon the figure of a boy leaning against the door post. The boy—the same Sybilla had once

met on the yellow tram—was shabbier even than when we saw him last, all the old roguish merriment seemed to have left him, his restless eyes looked out into the night as though he missed something and was looking for it always, his restless feet carried him backwards and forwards from the shed door to the entrance of the yard, but never any further, and when he moved it was with a halting tread unlike the active movements he had been accustomed to before.

There was another watcher there that night; a woman sitting all alone in one of the windows of the house. A woman young still, perhaps about eight or nine and twenty, and with a face that needed only a touch of animation to make it beautiful. Her eye was caught now and then by the figure of the boy, as he passed and re-passed across the strip of lamp light falling full into the open door of the shed, and she wondered vaguely what he could be doing there. One of the lads from the stables, she supposed, waiting to lead the horses home, when the day's work upon the tramway should be done. For herself she was watching for her husband. He was late that night. Each car that rattled down the street might be the one to bring him, and at the sound of each she rose from her seat and leant from the open window to look out and listen, till first one then the other of the cars passed for the last time and were dragged home to the great shed.

The yellow tram had been the last, and when that stopped, the boy, who for so long had been patiently, or

perhaps impatiently, waiting in the same spot, went out into the roadway eagerly, as though what he had waited for were come at last. Hardly delaying till the conductor had stepped down into the road, the lad touched him on the arm.

"I've been standing hereabouts for this hour and more," he said.

The man pushed him roughly on one side.

"Standing about; what for? What is it to me how long boys like you stand waiting here, or anywhere? Let me pass, can't you? The day's work is long enough, without being hindered at the end of it in this way."

The lad, appearing startled and confused, had drawn back at once.

"Taint him," he muttered under his breath. "Whatever shall I do if he's lost too—lost same as the other one?" Then, following the conductor hastily, he prayed him to stop for one moment, and listen to what he had to say.

"I was *told* to wait here. I was promised work," he said.

"Who promised it?"

"The conductor; he was a friend of mine. He give me work before—odd jobs now and again."

"I have no odd jobs; stand out of the way." The man spoke impatiently, but the boy would not be shaken off.

"It was work in the yard he promised me—for to take the horses to and fro. I couldn't come after it till now,

along of havin' broke my leg. I ain't but just got about again, and I *must* get work. It was the conductor of the yellow tram as was a friend to me. You ain't him; maybe you've took his turn for him to-night."

"Gentleman Alf! If you're a friend of his, you're too fine a friend for me! He's gone."

"Gone!" repeated the lad. "What—gone for good? Gone where?"

"Back to the swells he came from, I suppose. Will you stand out of the way? I tell you I've no work to give."

"You could speak for me in the yard; you know you could. They'd listen to you there. What's to become of Jim and me if I don't get work?"

"There are boys enough, and too many of them, in the yard already. Find work elsewhere; there's plenty of it in the world. No lack of work to be done; too much for me to stand idling here." With these last words the conductor once more pushed the lad roughly from him, so roughly that he reeled up against the wooden paling, and clung to it to save himself from a fall. One of the boys the conductor spoke of passed at the moment with a pair of jaded horses, and went away under the street lamps, whistling as he went.

"There may be work enough, but it's wrong divided, somehow; there ain't none for me," thought Phil, following this other boy with envious eyes. He stood there until the shed door was closed and locked, until the men had all gone away, and there was silence in the stone-

yard, where the night air was sweet with the scent of elder-flowers, and then shuffled away into the street, and pondering how to find "the other one," whoever that might be, made his way slowly and painfully to the crowded court where Mrs. Custers lived. Phil went to the further end of it, and so to the highest room in one of the old houses, the room he shared with Jim and two or three other boys, living, as Jim and himself lived, by themselves, living honestly or dishonestly, as the case might be, in this world where work was so "wrong-divided," but contriving between them all to scrape together the rent that kept a roof over their heads, so that no one interfered with them, or even so much as mounted the crazy stair leading to the door that wouldn't fasten, beyond which the room was as much their own as the castle of any Englishman who pays his rent is always.

Late as it was, the other boys had not come in. Only Jim was there, lying on two sacks in the corner of the room.

"What luck, Phil?"

Phil shook his head.

"It warn't him. He's lost, same as the other one. It was a new hand as was on the tram, and a rough one, not one to help or speak kind to a chap at all."

"Then we've no supper," observed Jim, with a patient sigh, for the last few pence had gone that very day to pay their share of the eighteen pence a week that kept a roof over these young heads.

"Not quite so bad as that," said Phil; "I had a horse

to hold early in the evenin', and got a penny, so there's your supper, Jim ; take and eat it, will you, and let's get to sleep."

"Where's yours?" A thin hand had come out eagerly and almost snatched the food, but Jim paused in the very act of conveying it to his mouth to ask that question.

"I couldn't eat no more, not if it was to please you ever so."

If the truth was that since the morning Phil had eaten nothing, still that untruthful answer, far from weighing on his conscience, seemed to make him a little more light-hearted than he had been before. He even whistled as he moved about the room.

"You've got it safe?" he asked, at last, when the scant meal was over, and Jim lay back upon his rough couch and looked a shade less wan and feeble than when Phil had first come in ; "you've got it safe?"

Jim nodded : he put his hand beneath the ragged jacket that covered his thin frame, and pulled out a small parcel securely, if somewhat untidily, wrapped up in a piece of brown paper. The parcel was heavy ; it needed only to take it in one's hand to know that it contained money.

"There ! hide it again. They are comin'," whispered Phil, as he threw himself upon the floor and drew another old sack round him ; "maybe we shall find him to-morrow ; I made sure as one would tell where t'other had got to, but both bein' lost, why, we're in a fix, Jim, and no mistake."

"We're used to that ; that's nothin' new," said Jim.

"It's a weight on one's mind, you see," said Phil, rolling over and tucking the sack more comfortably about him ; "I should feel more free like if that parcel was giv' back. We're used, as you was a-saying, to have things go *contrary* ; we're *not* used to a weight upon our minds : that's where it is, you see."

"And all owing to orange peel," observed Jim, sleepily.

"All owin' to peel : if I'd not been and slipped and broke my leg, and got took to hospital, and the parcel left with you, and you with no one honest to be trusted with it, and nothin' but the name upon it neither, no street nor nothin', why, if it hadn't been for that, the parcel wouldn't have been upon our minds, nor the other one wouldn't have been lost, nor we come to such grief all round as we have come to. It's a queer world."

"There's another," Jim roused himself to say.

"And a good thing, too," said Phil.

"When I'm gone there, and you've not me to see to, you'll do better, Phil."

"You shut up," exclaimed the boy ; "you ain't a-going there—leastways not yet awhile. Why, you get stronger every day."

Jim only smiled at that.

"If ever you find 'em, Phil," he said by-and-by, "you just tell the little girl as we said 'Our Father' regular, and kept honest. I'd like her to know that much."

"Take and tell her yourself, then," said Phil ; "I ain't

a-goin' to do no messages for you. You're strong enough to do your own, you are."

In the Red House, Sybilla, unable to sleep, had risen and gone once more into the room of her little lodger. She smoothed the pillow, bent over the child, and impressed upon her forehead the kiss she had withheld earlier in the night.

"I wonder why! I wonder what object he had in it?" she whispered to herself, as she pushed aside the blind and looked out into the silent street, where there was very little stirring now. Sybilla did not notice the figure of a man pausing for a moment to look up at the Red House as he passed; she stood there hardly an instant, and went back to try again to sleep. A few moments later the watch of the woman at the window in the stonemason's house was ended also; the step she listened for was heard at last rapidly crossing the yard, and her husband came into the room.



CHAPTER XII.

THUNDER IN THE AIR.

“**M**ARY SMITH! Where are you?”

“Here.” The child’s face appeared over the bannisters.

“Turn down your bed, open your window wide, and—Mary Smith,” Doris called again, as the little girl was already running to obey, “we are to have baked apples for dinner, and you are to be the market-woman, and go out and buy them.”

A joyful exclamation answered that, and Doris turned into the parlour, where Sybilla was rinsing the pretty Courtfield breakfast cups.

“I wish,” she said, “you would not call that child by both her—by two names. The habit is absurd; it worries me.”

“I wonder how we fell into it,” said Doris, “for we both do it constantly. However, if the habit worries you, we will drop it; she shall be Mary only from henceforth. Has she made her confession, by the way? Has she

told you the sin that weighed so much upon her heart last night?"

"I know it," answered Sybilla, shortly. The cups seemed to claim all her attention; one slipped in her hands; Doris cried out to her to take care.

"You are not well yet," she said; "I am sure your head is aching still. Go and sit down by the open window, and let me finish the washing up. You are just in the mood to break every cup we have. There!"

A saucer fell from the hands of Sybilla as her sister spoke: it was broken in two.

"There are days when I cannot bear the sight of this china," Sybilla said; "you were right, Doris, we cannot escape from our past. To-day is only what we made it while yesterday was with us."

"Yesterday," Doris repeated, as she fitted the broken pieces together; "if the breakfast things remind you of that, Syb, it is a pleasant reminder, surely. I remember this pink and white pattern through so many yesterdays,—through all my life. Don't think of Courtfield if it troubles you just now. Tell me what was Mary's dreadful crime?"

"I wish you would say nothing more to her about it; I wish you would not mention it in any way again," said Sybilla, with a nervous agitation in her manner that attracted the attention of Doris.

"Was it anything so very bad? Are you disappointed in her, Syb? You speak almost as though you were."

Sybilla put her hand to her head.

"I do not think she is a truthful child," she said.

"Why! that is exactly what we were always struck by," exclaimed Doris, in surprise,—*"her truthfulness, I mean. It is not like you to be hard on her for one fault."*

"I was not hard on her. She is forgiven. Can you not see that the cloud is gone, and the child happy once more? I could not be hard on her; the fault was not hers."

"Whose then?"

"Mine," replied Sybilla, pressing her hand upon her heart with the old gesture,—*"mine only. I see it now. The outcome, the natural growth of coldness that causes my affection to be doubted, my readiness to forgive to be doubted more strongly still."*

"Oh, come! You are talking nonsense now, you know you are. Your fault, indeed! Why you have been kindness itself to Mary. *You* cold, Syb! What are you dreaming of to say such things—and to say them to me of all people in the world?"

Doris had left the breakfast things to take care of themselves. She knelt down by Sybilla, drew her face towards her, kissed her cheek, and smoothed and patted it in a childish way she had, and with a loving touch that had never yet failed to soothe and cheer the weak fluttering spirits of the elder sister.

"If anyone having a claim upon it, Syb, doubts your affection, it is because they are not worthy of it, don't

know what affection is, or what a true, warm, loving heart you have. *I* ought to know. Mary is a tiresome little creature ; if she has led you to believe she is afraid of you, I shall have no patience with her, and, what is more, I'll tell her so."

"It is all over ; she is forgiven," repeated Sybilla, smiling again under the influence she never could resist.

"Of course she is ! and, as you said, the cloud is gone and the child happy. That's all very well. But was she scolded, Syb ? You know she was not. You know you could not scold anyone, however hard you tried. When did you ever scold *me*, I ask you ? But to educate a child is a great responsibility, and children *must* have a lecture read them now and then. It is well I am here to be stern and to reprove her when she needs it, for you could not do it"—and Doris shook her head, and tried to frown ; but failing signally, laughed instead.

"The great Mr. Smith must be called in," she resumed : "the papa with such a pleasant face of his own, *he* must come and lecture his daughter as she deserves. When will you go over to the shop ? It is going to be a warm day, a really summer day."

Sybilla, pushing Doris gently from her, rose from the chair near the window, which she threw more widely open, and then proceeded to pull down the green venetian blind, which darkened the room so much that Doris declared it was not safe to handle the Courtfield china in so dim a light.

There was certainly the promise of a sultry day to

come, the road was already glaring and dusty in the morning sun, the white wall of Merton & Coghlan's shop threw into their small room the dazzling reflected light which Sybilla always disliked, and always declared was more trying than direct sunshine. Of that last there was hardly enough at that early hour to make the darkening of the room the necessity that it undoubtedly would be later in the day; there was, too, enough air stirring to cause the venetian blind to move almost imperceptibly to and fro, tapping the window frame gently as it did so.

Doris thought it was owing to the headache of Sybilla that she shut out the sunshine so early in the day.

"Come across to the shop before it gets hotter still, and then you can keep quiet and cool all day," Doris suggested.

"If I have changed my mind," Sybilla answered, speaking in a low voice, and keeping her back to Doris; "if I have changed my mind, and intend to ask Mr. Bunter no questions about the child, neither to-day, nor at any other time, will you indulge me in the whim, dear, and be silent too?"

"But why?"

"I feel so sure that he knows nothing, or does not know the truth; and it is the truth only that we should care to hear."

"You mean to wait then till Mr. Smith appears of his own accord?"

"We shall see nothing of Mr. Smith."

"Have you come round to the opinion of Mrs. Bannerman?" asked Doris laughing; "do you think we are saddled for life with Mary?"

"How can I tell? If because of poverty at home, want, or distress of any kind she was sent here, we are too glad to keep her, Doris."

"But is she glad to stay with us? and who, for any poverty or distress, would cast a little child adrift?"

"She was not cast adrift—she was sent here."

"That may show that whoever sent her knew you would turn no one from the door of the Red House," said Doris; "but it looks sadly as though they had a mind to presume upon that knowledge, and impose upon us, Syb."

Sybilla made no answer.

"And is it right to make no enquiries?" Doris continued, as her deft fingers moved amongst the china to which she was now devoting her attention. "I had no doubts before, but the child was so distressed last night, and you—forgive me, Syb!—seem so troubled and unfit for calm judgment to-day, that it seems to me it would be more straightforward to learn all we can; that we ought to do it; that it would be right to do it now."

"I wish to do right; I am trying to do right. Do not make it harder for me, Doris, and give me a little time to think." Sybilla's voice was full of pain.

"It shall be as you like. You know best, and I

am glad to be ruled by you always," Doris hastened to exclaim.

"If I know myself, I would give up what is dearest to me, were it clearly right to do so."

"I object to Mary being considered your dearest," observed Doris.

"I do not know why she is here, I am more in the dark than ever," Sybilla went on.

"And yet you will ask no questions."

"Perhaps I dread the answer, or perhaps the one thing clear to me is that no questions would bring an answer that would satisfy us. The child is here, Doris——"

"Your old argument—always your strongest point," laughed the girl.

"Being here, will you be content, as we have been hitherto, to let her stay unquestioned, to wait and see what time will show us?"

"If you think it right," said Doris, with that gentle persistence in her own view that Sybilla knew so well,—
"if you are quite sure you think it right, we will let things take their course. I am sure I do not want to banish the little dove from the ark, even to send her out to seek an olive branch—talking of which it is quite time I sent her out to seek apples. What a thing it is to have a little maid to do one's errands, and so proud and glad to do them; and what a loss Mary Smith would be if she were to go away just now, or to go away ever any more at all!"

As she spoke, Doris left the room. She had not noticed the cloud upon the brow of Sybilla at the allusion to the sisters' words of the day before, nor did Doris hear the exclamation, "A dove of peace! is that her message here after all these years?" The passing of the inevitable yellow tram, which when, as now, the window was wide open so frequently did drown their words and oblige them to be repeated, drowned those words of Sybilla, who, when Doris left her alone, leaned back in the arm-chair and appeared lost in thought.

That she must confide to Doris the knowledge that had come with startling suddenness to Sybilla herself, was the thought that weighed upon her now. She was so loath to do it. She dreaded to see how the face of Doris would light up with smiles, and how what was a source of uneasiness to Sybilla would be a source of joy to her sister. Good woman though she was, with a heart so pitiful for others, a hand so ready to be stretched out to help them, Sybilla was blind to the fact that the once unselfish object of her life had become selfish of late years; that the wish to live for Doris, to keep Doris happy, had taken at last the form of a jealous desire to keep Doris to herself, and to have Doris live for her.

"To-morrow, only till to-morrow," thought Sybilla; "she has a right to know, and to-morrow I will tell her."

More than one to-morrow came and went, however, the week was drawing to a close, and Sybilla had not yet spoken. Little Mary was herself again; thoughtful now and then, speaking rather oftener of her mother, wonder-

ing over and over again whether she missed her very much, and how she could possibly manage without the services of her little daughter, but easily satisfied when Sybilla assured her that all must be well or she would have heard ere this, and that she would very soon hear of her parents now. Sybilla made these assurances with a confidence that astonished and perplexed Doris.

"Are you afraid of another burst of grief?" she asked once, "and do you think it right to buoy her up with false hopes?"

"Why should they be false?" asked Sybilla, blushing; "it would be more natural to suppose them true."

"And yet you never expect to hear of Mr. Smith!" cried Doris, fairly puzzled.

That week they were more at Clairville than at home. In the warm weather they were having now, it was pleasanter in the cool low rooms and in the shady garden than at the Red House, which seemed baked through with the June sun—pleasanter and far better for the child, Mrs. Bannerman declared. Two drawings of the picturesque old house were finished by this time, one in the tender tints of early spring, the other in the more luxuriant ones of summer. They must wait now for the chilly autumn picture of which the old lady had once spoken; the sisters were pleased, and a little amused, to see that as yet there were no preparations for the scene of desolation Mrs. Bannerman had promised. True, it was only June; the grass might perhaps be allowed to grow, and the weeds to spring as the year grew older; at

present the lawn was trim and neat, and not a weed dared show its head anywhere about the place.

In the court the air was hot and stifling. Mary, who had soon learnt to follow the sisters there, and had been proud to help in her little way amongst the poor, was no longer, in these warm summer days, allowed to do so. Twice, at Mrs. Bannerman's request, the child had been left all night at Clairville. On the first of these occasions she had stayed willingly enough, but when the same proposal was made a second time, and Sybilla assented to it warmly, Mary drew Doris on one side, and, with an anxious little face, asked her whether *she* had ever known dreams to come twice over.

"Who says they come twice over?" Doris asked.

"Mrs. Bannerman; I had a dream last night," said Mary, whispering, as the two stood by the sun-dial in the garden.

"What sort of dream, darling?"

"Of someone crying by my bed at night, and kissing me and crying still; of some one kneeling in my room to say their prayers. It was so real I thought I was awake, but Mrs. Bannerman told me it was a common dream, and sure to come to little children in this house."

"I would stay if I were you; dreams do no harm, and, perhaps, it may not come again after all," said Doris, more hopeful than ever that the little messenger of peace was unconsciously working still.

"I hope it will not come again," said Mary sighing;

“but for that I like very well to stay here, and you will fetch me to-morrow.”

All this time Sybilla had not failed to notice that her old friend the conductor of the yellow tram was missing from his accustomed place, and had been missing for so many weeks. Sybilla was the more disturbed at this, because she had never ceased to watch for the boy met with on that cold spring day when Mary had been lodging-hunting all alone,—never ceased to wonder whether “Jim” was “bad” still, or where he could be found.

“Your theory was at fault there, Doris,” she said, as the sisters stood for an instant at the entrance to the court before leaving it on that hot Saturday afternoon which they were both glad to think their charge was spending in the purer air of Clairville,—“your theory was at fault there, we had no message for that boy; our paths, mine and his, touched aimlessly, and for that moment only.”

“He may have had a message for *us*,” answered Doris,—“has had in one sense, and has delivered it already. But for watching so carefully for him you would not have come across others here whom you found while seeking him. And if his message were only to keep your eyes open and your heart warm, to urge you to new efforts, and make you the means of bringing help to others, why that is surely something.”

“A far-fetched notion,” said Sybilla.

“As for the ‘other Saxon,’” observed Doris, “we have

only to ask Mrs. Bannerman, to hear what has become of him."

"She said she knew nothing of him."

"Do you believe all she says? or do you think she means you to believe it? You are too short-sighted, Syb. For instance, her daughter; though the old lady implies that she is ignorant of all concerning her disobedient child, I feel sure that nothing happens to her that her mother does not know of."

"She is softened, and speaks more kindly of her now, I think. And you heard her say to-day that Harold had displeased her——"

Sybilla looked rather anxiously at her sister.

"She said, 'High-minded fiddlestick!' and said it with her nose in the air," answered Doris laughing; "I suspect some proposal has been made to Harold which, being against his cousin's interest, he has refused; that would be like him."

"I wonder whether he will come home," said Sybilla.

"He has his fortune to make," remarked Doris, with a little sigh.

The air was growing more hot and oppressive every moment; threatening clouds rolled together in the sky; everything was still as death; and the Red House, when the sisters entered it, felt close and suffocating.

Doris threw doors and windows open.

"There is a storm coming," she said; "let us sit here and watch it. One can scarcely breathe. Do you remember how grandly the storms swept across that wide

landscape from the hill behind the Rectory? Here we must be content to see the elements at war amongst chimney pots ; it is a grand war still, the grander always for this long, solemn pause, Syb, do you not think so ? ”

“ Listen to me, Doris,” began Sybilla, in whose heart there seemed a pause, while she collected her strength to speak of that which had for the last few days weighed upon her conscience, “ I have something to tell you.”

“ Those are horrible little words ; they preface a storm always,” said Doris, rather absently ; “ don’t keep me in suspense. See how the people are hurrying home.”

“ We two alone together have got on so well,” Sybilla began.

“ We three, you mean,” said Doris, smiling, and still watching the passers-by along the street, where it grew darker and darker every instant ; “ we have got on just as well since Mary came.”

“ It is about her I wish to speak—it is right you should know——” Sybilla felt it hard to go on.

“ We have surely enough for her and for ourselves too ? ” said Doris, whose thoughts were running upon ways and means and upon nothing more serious. “ There ! ” she exclaimed suddenly, as a vivid flash of lightning was followed almost instantaneously by a crash of thunder that shook the house from top to bottom. The storm seemed to have broken just over their heads.

“ Here is the rain ! ” added Doris, as it poured down in perfect torrents ; “ and see !—why, Syb, what can he



**"In another moment Doris held the sheet towards her ; the girl's face had
flushed, her eyes shone."**

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want?—Merton & Coghlan's shop-boy running to us round the corner with a newspaper."

Doris hastened to the door; Sybilla following her found her with the paper in her hand; the boy ran quickly back. The dash of the rain, the crashing thunder seemed to fill Sybilla's ears; she could not make out what it was that Doris was saying, as they turned back into the parlour, where the first thing claiming attention was the open window, at which the rain was coming in. Doris went to shut it. They could hear themselves speak then.

"What a confusion!" she said; "it is only some advertisement which Mr. Bunter wanted us to see at once. Very attentive of him, I am sure. I suppose it is for my designs or for your illustrations, and he feared we might lose a chance by delaying to reply to it. Still he need hardly have sent the poor boy out into such rain. What a fussy little man it is."

She was still holding the paper, and now folded it back to search for the advertisement which had been important enough to induce Mr. Bunter to send round to them so hurriedly.

"I can't find it," she said, while Sybilla, glad of a reprieve, sat silently watching the falling rain; but in another moment Doris held the sheet towards her; the girl's face had flushed, her eyes shone.

"Oh, Syb, see here! How glad I am!"

"Thomas Unwin Blake, Sybilla Blake, Doris Rachel Blake, children of the late Rev. Thomas Blake, Rector

of Courtfield, are requested to apply at,"— here followed an address,— "where they will hear of something to their advantage."

There was complete silence for a moment, and then Sybilla said coldly,

"Why should that make you glad, Doris? I thought you were content; you said just now that surely we had enough."

"We should hear of Tom," said Doris; "it is that makes me glad."

"He will apply of course; you are right there. Let him have all the 'advantage.'"

"Perhaps, seeing this, he is thinking as I thought when I saw it first, that it will lead to a meeting between us three," Doris spoke wistfully.

"He can find us when he likes—whenever he wants anything of us—without the help of that advertisement," said Sybilla, with the old bitterness; "you may take my word for it, child?"

"You will not go then?"

"The offer is made to us all—*you* can go if you will," replied the elder sister.

The eyes of Doris filled with tears.

"I always knew when the opportunity came for you to choose between him and me, that you would choose Tom," Sybilla went on.

"Let us both choose him," said Doris, softly; "surely he needs us both."

"He will need us less than ever now. How often

have I told you that *anything* he needed I would freely give if it were in my power? I have done so, would do so again—all but *one* thing. And there is no doubt that, when he does need anything, he will let us know. Has he not proved that?"

"People change," Doris ventured to observe; "he may want *us*, not what we have to give."

"Then let him seek us first. But I have no wish to tyrannize over you. Go you to Tom."

"I go nowhere without you," said Doris, stooping to kiss her; "you know that. You talk of choosing, and do not see that I *have* no choice, dear Syb, can have none, but to please you, and repay you, if that were possible, for all your love for me."

The very quietness with which she spoke satisfied the heart of Sybilla more than the warmest protestations could have done. When Doris folded the paper and put it on one side, remarking that they would wait and see what time brought forth, Sybilla caught at the words.

"Yes, only let us do that,—only let us wait and allow things to take their course, events to shape themselves. It is taking the first step I so much dread. The responsibility is too great."

"There is sometimes responsibility incurred by taking no step at all," said Doris gently; "we must remember that."



CHAPTER XIII.

TOM.

IN the same night through which so many anxious thoughts had banished sleep from the pillow of Sybilla, those thoughts had been shared, however strange it may appear that such should be the case, by the lonely watcher at the window of the house in the stone-mason's yard. As her husband came into the room at last, the words with which she greeted him might almost have been the echo of those Sybilla whispered to herself, as she stood by the window of little Mary's room.

"I sit here wondering why you did it ; wondering what could have been the object," the woman said, turning her head towards the new comer.

"You should not sit here ; you should go to bed. It is a dreary place to watch in all alone."

He came up to her and kissed her as he spoke, but when she would have risen to prepare some simple meal, the materials for which were already placed in disorder

upon the table, he bade her sit down again, for he could do it all himself. And he was as good as his word, and seemed to know just what to do and where to lay his hand on all he wanted.

"I miss her so," the woman said.

"And don't you suppose I miss her too—our little sunshine—especially when I can't find the salt cellar? Ah! here it is!"

"Why did you do it, Tom?"

"For your sake, dear love; surely you know that? It is the first opening we have had in all these years."

"So many years, she sighed."

"It will be soon over now," he said, cheerfully; "and you will have her back again."

"How soon? Tell me, that I may count the days and hours."

"How soon? to-morrow, if you like: next week, at latest. The child is well and happy—or if not happy away from us, she is not sad."

"You were there to-night?" she asked quickly.

"Do I ever miss it? Could I sleep, or could you sleep either, if I had not passed the house? I smoked a cigar under the window," he threw back his head and laughed, and supper being now ready, pressed her to come to the table and share the meal with him. She only shook her head.

"I've had mine long ago. It is so dismal waiting here alone, with no one to help me to do a thing, no little voice to make music in the dull day, no——"

"No Mary, in fact. Well, I understand all that. She has been to Clairville again. You say you wonder why I sent her from us. I am sure poor, good old Syb must wonder at it still more."

"What good is it for the child to go to Clairville, when they don't know who she is?"

"If they *did* know it, would she go there at all?" he asked.

"She does not care; she never can have cared," his wife said, drearily; but whoever "she" might stand for in those words of hers, they did not apply to her little daughter,—that was evident from the reply that followed them.

"And yet *you* care for even this short separation, and do not see how what you did in leaving her may have gone far to break her heart."

"I would have done anything for you," she said, rising to pass her hand over his brow, and standing by him while she spoke; "you know it was for you I did it."

"And I have brought trouble on whoever crossed my path, on you no less than on others—no less! Why, how much more than on any other?"

"Not trouble only, Tom. In each other we have been happy always. You talk sometimes as though you wish we had never met."

"I can't wish that, dear love; I never have wished that. I wish only that no wrongdoing had followed our meeting. I wish only to make up for such wrongdoing,

as far as may be, now, late as it is,—too late, perhaps, for we are but reaping as we sowed, and the harvest—such a harvest!—for what we know, may not even yet be fully come.”

“There can’t be a worse crop, or a more bitter one to reap, than her long displeasure,” she said, weeping.

“There may be; God forbid it should be so! But ‘the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children.’” He spoke in a low voice, and she clung sobbing to him, and begged and prayed him not to frighten her like that. It was bad enough, she said, to be alone; but if any harm came to the child through their fault, it would be the drop too much.

Anyone who had seen him take her in his arms and soothe her then; had seen him persuade her to go to rest, and, not allowing her to exert herself at all, had seen him, with his own hands, put the room to rights; anyone who had heard him remind her gently of the love that watched over her innocent child, and remind her, too, and that almost in the very words of Doris to little Mary earlier the same evening, that repentance can right wrong-doing, and they were doing their best now; anyone hearing and seeing all this, noticing, too, how his wife clung to him, looked up to him, and reposed upon his words, and took comfort from them, might well have accused Sybilla of undeserved harshness in having said of him that “he had not a grain of principle, and self was the centre of all he said or did.” And yet, in the days of which she had said it, it was true.

It was more than probable that, had Sybilla, or anyone else as much interested as she was in his welfare, possessed the power of ordering Tom Blake's life with a view to his improvement, to raising the low standard by which he measured all his aims, and to making him a good man generally, they would, if they had provided him with a wife at all, have given him one of a character so strong as well as noble that, loving him devotedly while clear-sighted to all the evil in him, she might at last have raised him to her own level.

But then Tom had all his life been blessed with good friends, whose principles should have influenced his own and yet had failed to do so, signally. With a father whose high-minded truth and honour were equalled only by his good warm heart; a mother so gentle, and so pious that the only fault her worst enemy could have discovered in her was her idolatry of Tom himself; with a sister whose standard was as high as his was low, and who, in their younger days, had been at times able to excite his enthusiasm for goodness, and to fire his imagination at all events—if nothing beyond that—with a wish to lead a noble life.

Having had all this, and having wasted and misspent it all in the morning of life, it was a wiser discipline that had led him to fix his affections on a weak and faulty nature, so faulty, so weakly ready to be led wrong, by him especially, that the more he loved her and the more she clung to him and loved him in return, the more plainly did he come to see his own faults reflected in hers,

and the more keenly did he at last begin to feel the responsibility of having involved her not only in the consequences of his own sins but in the sins themselves.

The lesson had taken long to learn. For some years, disappointed in the fortune he had expected with his wife, though to do him justice never disappointed in his wife herself, and with no inclination to acknowledge at Courtfield a marriage the tidings of which would have been received as a new blow, he kept it secret, lived the old careless life, and found it but the merrier for the companionship of his young wife, and, as we already know, was an ever-increasing burden upon his father's means.

But, as time wore on, a very unconscious little preacher began to preach to Tom a silent sermon, which had more effect upon him than any he had ever listened to from the pulpit of Courtfield church. Sybilla had truly said "out of sight, out of mind" described him well, and the constant presence of his wife and child kept up in him a constant habit of affection. By slow degrees his child became a conscience to him. He actually caught himself trying to *be* what little Mary was growing up to believe him, caught himself growing frightened at her faith in him. Tom always had liked to be the first with those he lived with, and indeed had always contrived that he should be so. Certainly he was first with his wife, and if her devoted affection was somewhat exacting, why so much the better for him, since it was now he who

must lavish love and attention upon others instead of existing to receive them only. Not all his mother's unselfishness was so good for Tom as the exactions of his wife, nor had the influence of Sybilla's upright character ever been so powerful as the weak, clinging fondness of one whom it was so fatally easy to lead wrong.

Still, it was by slow, very slow degrees that the change came, nor can it be said to have fully come at all until the year the rector died.

In the spring of that year Tom's little daughter fell dangerously ill. Her mother was helpless with grief and terror, added to which she had never been strong herself. It was Tom who sat by the small bed, who watched through the long nights, who, half laughing to find himself occupied in such unaccustomed tasks, helped his wife in many ways in which the child, young as she was, had already for long been so helpful that her mother missed her sorely. Above all, it was Tom, who, when his wife sobbed out their child was dying,—and what else had they any right to expect or hope for?—not laughing at himself then, but more than ever surprised and wondering at himself, knelt by the bed where he had watched so many days and nights and tried to pray, tried to raise the mother's thoughts to that Heaven for which it seemed so certain now that little Mary was fast leaving them.

Nor did the feelings that had their birth beside his child's sick-bed leave him when that shadow passed from his home, and the little girl was gradually restored to



"Tom knelt by the bed where he had watched so many days and nights,
and tried to pray."



health and strength. All other resources having failed him now, owing to his father's death, Tom actually began to work. He used to say it was the knowledge of the minute details of housekeeping he had acquired during Mary's illness that had shown him the necessity for this, for up to that time he really had had no idea what bread and cheese, to say nothing of coals and candles, cost, and always marvelled where money went to. He would make a joke of this, with the old winning way Sybilla had described, a way that stood him in good stead now and made him many friends. True they lived harder, dressed more poorly than before, but they knew what they had to spend, borrowed no money, and were in all ways happier than they ever had been yet. Tom's wife would wonder now and then why it should be so. It astonished her to find from experience that happiness was in no way at all dependent upon pretty things, fine dresses, or a well-filled purse, for they had lost all these and were happy still. She felt half-inclined to leave well alone, and remain in the north of England instead of returning to London, when an opening occurred of finding more lucrative employment there.

"Of course it would be nice to be well off again," she said; "but really we have all we want; I never knew before how little one *does* want, or with how little money one can be content."

"There are other things than money," her husband answered, with a gravity that was new to him, and then, quick to catch his meaning, she burst into tears and

begged him, who could, she said, make everyone do as he wished, and gain any end he really set himself to gain, reconcile her to her mother, whose long displeasure broke her heart. Her child's illness had brought a message to her also, and had reawakened the old remorse, the old longing for her mother's affection that had been the only bitter drop in her cup till then, but which had not seemed so bitter to her of late years, almost as though she were growing accustomed to the estrangement, and needed no love but that of husband and child.

Once in London, they made such overtures as were possible to the mother, who seemed to find it impossible to forgive, but made them without avail. Letters were returned unopened, the door was shut against them, they seemed as far from their object as ever, and, as a necessary consequence of the removal from their old home, and the fresh start in a fresh place, were, for the time being, poorer than ever.

Still, it was with no intention of throwing a burden upon his sisters that Tom had sent Mary from him, but simply in the hope that the child, through their means, might, while unknown herself, win the heart of her grandmother. In that sultry morning, while Sybilla was bewildering Doris with her request that no questions might be asked concerning the little girl, Tom, lingering with his wife at the open window of their one poor room, was explaining to her all he had wished and hoped from Mary's presence at Clairville.

"There would have been no object in sending her to

Sybilla," he said; "there was an object in sending her to Clairville. She cannot betray herself, for, fortunately, she never so much as knew the name of her grandmother, or heard of her aunts in all her life."

"You should not have made her give a name not her own," said Mary's mother; "it is teaching her to tell fibs."

"I am afraid that *was* wrong," Tom admitted, candidly; "but it is certain that by this time she has betrayed that secret, and got that weight off her conscience."

"Then, where *is* the use of leaving her there? or where *was* the use of parting with her?"

Tom laughed, and patted his wife gently on the shoulder, as he explained without the least idea that his poor little daughter had been too conscientious to disobey the order he had given, and that from her Sybilla never would have learnt that which the photograph had accidentally revealed.

"Knowing, as she must know now," Tom said, "whose child Mary is, Sybilla is not proud enough of me to proclaim the relationship. She would not have deceived your mother, in the first instance, but I feel tolerably sure she will not undeceive her. If she did, the crisis would only come a little sooner. Something must be left to the chapter of accidents."

"How did you, or do you, intend the crisis to come, if all goes as you wish?"

As, to tell the truth, Tom did not very well know, and

had, in point of fact, left a great deal to the chapter of accidents, he evaded the question of the crisis altogether, and went on to say that, as he could no longer bear to see his wife's pale cheeks, or have her fret for Mary as she did, he would fetch the child home that week.

"Or the next. Suppose we say Sunday. On Sunday I will go and see them; astonish the weak nerves of old Syb, and see little Doris once again."

"Little Doris! She is as tall as I am. I have watched her passing in the street. We might all work together, all try together, to win my mother to receive us, when you have been to the Red House. They would like Mary to be well off; they must love her so well by this time that, even if they disliked me, and bore a grudge to me, they would be pleased that your child—their own niece, Tom—should have my fortune."

"If I know my sisters, that will not interest them much. Surely, dear love, in all these years, if we have learnt anything, we have learnt that what we are is of more importance than what we have."

"You grow too wise for me," she answered; "you did not always think like that."

"Too true!" exclaimed Tom, ruefully. His past was for ever coming back to him, and he found it harder to lead even his facile-natured wife right than it had been to lead her wrong; very hard at times to make her see how much in that past he would fain have blotted out had it been possible.

"You are happier than I am, love," he said gently, his thoughts straying to the quiet churchyard at Courtfield as he spoke, and a spasm of pain, to which he was growing familiar whenever he remembered his mother, contracting his heart. "My mother can never say, 'I forgive you !' but you shall hear it from yours still. Only, life is so uncertain."

"Don't say that. It is these dismal tombstones make you think of it."

She looked round, with an expression of disgust, upon the stones and slabs, hot and white already in the sunshine, excepting in the spot where fell the shadow of the elder tree. "They will be glad to see you at the Red House, Tom."

"Sybilla never will be glad to see me."

"Oh, why not? Is she such a cross, sour old maid as that? One of your saints, I suppose, and hard upon every one not saint-like as herself?"

"Hard upon no one but me, and with good reason to be hard on me—I have told you so many times."

"*You* could not help the accident that happened long ago."

"What I could have helped and did not were the words that passed between them first; what I could have helped and did not were the scrapes I led him into, and the harm I did him from the day we met; the money I lent him, and that was not mine to lend; the gambling men I introduced him to. Why, his object in leaving Courtfield on that day was to receive money for a debt

of honour from a friend of mine—to receive it only to repay me.”

“He was with us when we married—that hasty, stolen marriage, dear—and kept our secret so well,” his wife said, regretfully. “How much you felt his death, how shocked you were, and how I felt for you, Tom!”

“It was enough to shock a man; but I have felt it more lately, thought of it more than ever I did at first.”

“Lately? why, it happened years and years ago!”

“And if, during those ‘years and years’ I have been happier each year than the last—so happy with my own sweet wife!—should that make me feel less or more for the wrecked life of a sister who, but for me, might be as happy as I am myself?”

She liked that, although she gave no other answer than to press nearer to him, and rest her head a moment on his shoulder.

“Fetch Mary home,” she said by-and-by; “your words of life being uncertain have made me nervous. This is a place to feel nervous in; you would know it if you were here alone as much as I am. The flickering shadow of the elder thrown on those stone figures makes them seem alive.”

“On Sunday I will fetch the child. I have so much work this week. Family scenes,—as I watch the flickering shadows I feel such scenes coming in the air, dear love,—explanations, burying of hatchets generally

all round, would disturb and upset my mind. I could not calmly devote myself to my dead alderman."

"Your dead alderman?"

"Yes; a monumental group. And won't I make it as hideous as—as any here?" He waved his hand towards the stones.

"If you do that you will get no more orders."

"My dear, they prefer them ugly. Is there one here in good taste, unless it is the angel by the cross, and Mary, who has a correct idea of art, is not satisfied even with that?"

"I know nothing about art, but I wish we had the stone dog back. I thought it beautiful."

"The money for it would have been beautiful," said Tom, with an odd grimace; "that lad was dishonest, after all."

"It was such a silly thing," she said, "to send the money by him. Of course he took it; a poor boy like that."

A shade passed over the brow of her husband; a sin that sat too lightly on her conscience had begun to weigh so heavily on his.

"Who are we, that we should judge him?" he exclaimed with so much bitterness that his wife raised her head to look at him in surprise; then coloured crimson, and hid her face in both her hands.

He drew her to him and then kissed her, and, bidding her good-bye, with a charge to keep up her spirits in his absence, and not tire herself or get into any

mischievous without Mary to take care of her, he went away to that place, wherever it might be, and whither we need not follow him, where the monumental works of art were modelled, first in clay, then cut and chiselled into shape before reaching the yard,—a transitory resting-place on the road to their final destination.



CHAPTER XIV.

A CONTENTED COUPLE.

RINDING along the iron rails, jangling noisily up and down the road as it has done throughout this story hitherto, as it must do till the story is ended and the tale fully told, the yellow tram, in the hot, stifling air of the Saturday afternoon, that Sybilla and Doris spent alone together, pursued its noisy way untiringly; pursued it still and more discordantly than ever, in the solemn pause that heralded a coming storm, and pursued it, without stopping for an instant, amidst the crashing thunder and the hissing rain.

The car was full; foot-passengers going in the same direction had fled to it for shelter when the storm broke at last. There was only standing-room left inside when its late conductor and James Fane entered together.

“Ugh! the old monster. How I hate it!” Alf ex-

claimed, shaking the drops from his umbrella, and then pushing his way up the car far enough to avoid the rain that tried to dash in even there.

"An ungrateful remark to make to-day, of all days in the year, when you are a passenger for the first time, and in such rain as this," said his companion, laughing; "the monster is nothing to you, now, no more than it is to me; a friendly monster helping us on our way."

"I am glad we met to day; I am glad to have you with me," Alfred said then,— "glad to know for certain, and to be able to bring the proof with me—in bringing you—that it was not the old lady herself who put this in"—he held the same paper in his hand as that which Doris had just laid aside with a patient sigh of regret.

"She did not put it in," said James, "and why you ever should have thought so puzzles me. His sisters are mentioned too."

"She does odd things, the old lady does, and takes odd notions. Harold and I, both having disappointed her——" A blinding flash of lightning stayed his words; the women in the car cried out and hid their eyes; no one spoke until the peal of thunder that followed had echoed overhead and died away with angry rumbling in the distance.

"Having disappointed her, as you say,—and *not* having disappointed me, old fellow," James began,— "you fancy she would communicate with your friend; but why with his sisters also?"

"Well, it *was* fancy, since you know it is not from

her. I am glad to have seen it before I started ; glad to think better days may be dawning for him."

They were silent then ; indeed, owing to the noises of the storm added to its own noises, the tram could not be called a pleasant place for conversation, and the two friends exchanged no further remarks until the car had gone rattling by the Red House, had been swallowed up in the dark shade of the railway bridge, had come out into daylight again, and a few yards further on, was passing the stone-mason's yard, at which spot Alf Bannerman and James, still in each other's company, left it, and turned up where the curved lines led to the huge shed.

The rain was by this time falling softly. The tombstones and the blocks of granite shone with wet, water poured off the stone angel's wings, there were little pools and miniature rivers everywhere in the yard ; the leaves of the elder, and of the vine that was trained up the house, were so well washed from every particle of dust, and soot, and London black, and were so fresh and green, that to look at them they might have been growing in some country place.

There seemed to be no one in the house, for they could get no answer to their repeated knocks, and the door was fastened.

"I never thought of this," said Alf impatiently. "I made sure of finding him on a Saturday afternoon."

"You have not the gift of patience ; come under the shed, and wait. Your cousin will be back soon, no doubt, even if her husband is not."

"I don't want to see *her*—not without him at least. I never saw her in my life," Alf answered, as they picked their way across the wet, sloppy ground, and took shelter in the open doorway of the shed.

"How was that?" James asked, although he had known the fact before.

"I met Blake out and about in Manchester; he never took me home; and after they came to London, you know as well as I do the conditions that were made."

"I never thought them unwise," said James; "you know yourself whether his companionship did you good or harm."

"A man does not always want to be done good to; he wants to enjoy his life," with an impatient gesture that made James laugh. "Those were merry days in Manchester, and Blake is as steady as old Time now. Why, on that night I did go to him, the night before you brought me Harold's letter, if you had heard the world of good advice he gave me; if you had heard how he preached, listened to half he said! You yourself could not have given a longer sermon, or a better, or one as good, for that matter, since Tom has more experience in the things he spoke of than you ever had. He's not what he was. I found him a changed man quite."

"I *thought* something was the matter with you that morning," observed James drily; "and when they came to lodge here you had already left—had you not?"

Just then Tom and his wife came in sight, hurrying past the low paling that separated the yard from the



"Tom and his wife came in sight, hurrying past the low paling that separated the yard from the street."

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street. They had been out together to make some frugal purchases in preparation for a feast on the morrow, when Mary should come home. If the fatted calf was feebly represented upon this occasion by certain knobby parcels of raisins, figs, and ginger cakes, with various other condiments known to have charms for the wisest and most dignified of persons at Mary's time of life, why the merriment was not less, but more because of that. The parents were laughing together, as, through having to carry most of the parcels, Tom awkwardly knocked off his wife's bonnet with the umbrella, which he somehow or other contrived to carry at the same time, and if on that summer afternoon there was in all London a contented pair, that pair were entering the stone-mason's yard at that moment.

It was not their content that struck Alf Bannerman however. *He* noticed only that his cousin's dress was poor, that the cotton umbrella was one Tom, in the days when Alfred and himself got into scrapes together, would have been ashamed of, and that the door the husband and wife went in at laughing was so low that Tom stooped his head a little, and led, as Alf well knew, to rooms that were very small and humble.

"And to think of all my cousin might have had! To think, too, of that flourishing business, Merton & Coghlan, going begging!" he exclaimed, as the two who had been waiting in the shed left it, to follow the newcomers.

"Things work round in the most unexpected way, if

only you take hold of the right clue," observed James, setting his foot in a big puddle and splashing himself from head to foot.

"Clue?" repeated Alfred; "there is none; everything is at cross-purposes everywhere, and no one sees the end of any path he sets out upon, or where it leads to."

"What need to see the end so long as we do right? and that's the only clue I know of, Alf. It is laid in our hands, and only when we drop it are we entangled, as you truly say, in paths that cross and recross one another, and may well bewilder us."

"But if we *have* dropped it?"

"It is never far off—falls only at our feet; we can stoop and pick it up again when we will. Still it is an ascertained fact that even with the best of clues the way back is harder to find than any other, and to retrace one's steps is always difficult."

They had reached the house now, and on knocking this time heard the voice of Tom calling to them to come upstairs. They were made heartily welcome, none the less so for the errand that had brought Alfred there at all. The advertisement at once put Tom in a state of wild excitement, though he at once, as Sybilla had failed to do, hit the right nail on the head, by declaring it could have been inserted by no other person than his father's brother. Tom could not help being very sanguine,—above all, could not help cherishing the hope that when the crisis, as he called it, came, that is to say if it came at all, and he and his wife's mother met again, he might

appear before her, not as a suppliant for her bounty, but with the independence of a rich man.

James Fane, who had been introduced merely as a friend of Alfred's, and had begged that nothing might be said to betray his intimacy with the mistress of Clairville, or that he was in any way her adviser, watched the husband and wife with much interest. He drew his own conclusions from the affection and confidence which so evidently existed between them, from the absence of all repining over the hardness of their lot, from the gravity of Tom's words and look at some chance mention of Alfred's aunt. In fact, James made up his mind that if this man had once dropped the clue of which James himself had lately spoken, it had been recovered now and was held fast.

"You saw her, then?" Tom's wife asked with a faltering voice when Alfred spoke of his aunt.

He shrugged his shoulders; the interview had not been a pleasant one.

"Did she speak of me? was she angry that you came that evening to see Tom? I hope it did you no harm, cousin. It was a hard condition to have made that you were never to come near us, and it is because of that, that we two never met till now, and you an old friend of Tom's."

Tom looked uncomfortable; his old friends had not all been such as he would have cared for his wife to meet.

"I don't know that the condition was hard," he said; "when did I ever be of use or do good to anyone who

sought me? and as for Alf, I did him harm enough at one time. If your mother wanted to keep him steady, and put his steadiness to the test, she was right enough to bid him avoid me."

"Not now, Tom," said his wife.

"Ah, but we reap *now* what we sowed *then*," Tom answered, smiling at her, "and we must be patient, you and I. How goes it with you, Alf? In coming to live here, close to the home of your yellow tram, I thought we might have seen one another off and on, and that without breaking conditions either, but I missed you from the old car the first time I took it to this place."

But for the presence of the friend he had brought with him, Alfred might possibly have expatiated a little upon the sacrifice, to their cousin's interests, made both by Harold and himself; as it was he simply mentioned Harold's friendly offer to him, and explained that he was on the eve of starting to begin a new life in a new world.

"May it be a prosperous and a happy life, old fellow! and, at all events, you will wait and see what my luck is, what is this advantage offered me, for perhaps, it may be one that I can share with you, and if it is, you know how glad I should be to share it," said Tom, who already in imagination felt himself in a position to confer benefits and scatter gifts on all whom he had ever injured, and who had, because of that, a claim on him to do what he could for them now.

Meantime, finding her question evaded always, for she

put it again and again, and that Alfred hesitated to say whether his aunt had spoken of her child, and how she had spoken, Tom's wife turned to James, as he stood apart observant of all that went on, and asked him whether he ever was at Clairville. Hearing that he was, she begged him to describe the house to her as it seemed to him now.

"It may be changed from my time," she said.

Upon that he pictured, in the best words he could find, the dull sombre room in which the old lady passed her days.

"It used not to be so; it was bright with ornaments and pretty household trifles once," she said; "where are they now?"

"Hidden away, perhaps; kept sacred as mementos of a past life that was bright, too, once," he answered.

"Are there no pictures in that room—the room where the mistress of the house sits all alone?" she asked.

"There is one picture."

"The picture of a girl! My picture. She has not sent that away then. Do you know you give me the first hope I have had yet? for if in banishing everything else she keeps that still, it must be that she may look at it often, it must be that she does not forget me quite. It is my picture, is it not?"

"How can I tell?"

"It would not be like me now, of course; you would not know it for me, perhaps. Where does it hang? In its old place, over the parlour door?"

"There is a picture hanging there," he said, watching her intently while he spoke; "I never saw the subject of it."

"Never noticed it, you mean. Well, I daresay it had no interest for you; when you see it next——" Something in his look made her pause.

"I cannot see it; it is turned facing the wall."

At that she sunk her face into her hands to hide it from him, and said how hard and cruel the heart must be that could treat a child's picture so, and that he had taken away from her the hope his words had but a moment before inspired her with.

"You have a little daughter of your own I think?" he said then.

She assented silently by a movement of her bowed head.

"Try to judge of your mother's feelings by yours for your own child; try to read her heart by that. Believe me, in this that causes you so much distress I see more hope than if nothing had been displaced or altered in your old home at all."

Tom, who had been listening gravely to these last few words, bade his wife be comforted and take heart.

"If my uncle has really come home—come home with a fabulous fortune, dear, like a rich uncle in a story-book, and if I have seen him first, and we two taking Mary with us go to her then, she cannot doubt that we seek her pardon only, and no worldly goods, and we may all be very happy yet."

"And Mary comes home to-morrow," she said smiling.

Tom, however, prayed her to be patient for one or two days longer; the sight of the advertisement had altered his plans, he said. It would be better now to see his uncle first; in all probability he should meet his sisters there; the "crisis" was working round in an unexpected manner, he declared, not exactly as he had expected but all the better for that. The meeting with Sybilla would now come about naturally when the same errand led them both to the solicitor's office mentioned in the advertisement. They would wait till then to claim the little girl; it would be the delay of one day only.

His wife consented, though looking rather regretfully at the sumptuous preparations contained in the blue paper parcels, and thinking rather regretfully of the happy Sunday she had pictured to herself; and a few minutes afterwards the party separated, strangely enough, without anything having been said to give James Fane the impression that the sisters of Tom Blake were intimate at Clairville, still less that Mrs. Bannerman's own grandchild was quite at home there. Often as James had been backwards and forwards of late, he had as yet never chanced to meet either Sybilla or Doris. Whether this was owing to chance merely, or to any of the precautions always strictly enforced upon the old lady's servant to admit no one without, as the girl expressed it, "leave asked and give particular," does not much concern us. The fact remains that James knew nothing at all of the Misses Blake excepting that there

were two such people in the world, and that they had for the present the charge of their brother's child, which, under the circumstances, and seeing, as he plainly did see, the evidence of poverty in Tom's own home, appeared to him a most natural arrangement. It was news to him when Alfred observed, as they left the house together, that quarrels seemed pretty general everywhere, for there were plenty about, and Tom and his sisters had been estranged for years.

"Very good of them to take the child then," James said.

"Yes, I suppose so ; but I really know nothing of it."

The thoughts of Alfred were dwelling rather uncomfortably upon the idea that if Tom was to be a rich man, Alf's own sacrifice was needless, and he might just as well have stayed amongst old friends at home. Still, to do him justice, he was ashamed of such thoughts, having already learnt to look forward with pleasure to an honest, independent life, with Harold's help, not patronage, and every opportunity and hope of repaying Harold that help in the long run, and of their being mutually of use to one another.

The sight of the tramway car passing in the street, which was now so clean-washed and fresh from the summer rain, reminded Alfred that he had neglected one object he had had in view in his visit to Tom that afternoon. Alfred had forgotten to ask after Phil, the lad who had been now and then employed both by Tom and Alf himself to run errands for them, and do odd jobs of

work. To remedy this neglect on his part, and with a vague notion that Phil's future, though he was but a ragged street boy, and Phil's start in life, might be as important to him as that of Alf was to himself, he hailed his old enemy once more, and waving a farewell to James, mounted the yellow tram for the purpose merely of making interest with its present conductor to obtain the promised work for Phil.

He was too late. The clue was lost again. The world, where paths crossed and recrossed each other, and were in such a tangle, where work being so "wrong divided" there seemed so much too much for some and none at all for others, had swallowed up poor Phil once more, and the service Alfred had not rendered at the moment but had forgotten, it was too late to render now. It was not likely that Phil, wandering about in search of the "other one," who was no less a person than Tom Blake,—it was not likely Phil, after his repulse a week ago, would be found loitering about the tramway again.



CHAPTER XV.

HONEST PHIL.

AN idle boy standing at a street corner, and standing so near a public-house too.

"Give him your penny?" asked a woman passing of a child walking by her side; "give him your penny? Why should you do that? Don't you see where it would go? There—in the public-house at once. Drop it in a missionary-box; nothing so harmful as promiscuous giving in the streets."

The two had been delayed for a moment at the crossing; a heavy dray loaded with beer barrels was passing; the woman's voice was loud and harsh; Phil heard every word.

"If she'd giv' that penny 'miscuous, whatever that may be, it wouldn't have gone in drink neither," he said to himself softly.

He moved on a step or two, and then stood still again, keeping a sharp look-out up and down the street,

and on all sides. One or two cabs laden with luggage passed by-and-by, he gave them a sharp glance, but paid no further heed, until there came one the driver of which turned his head to look at the numbers on the doors of the houses, and to read the name of the streets,—turned his head so slightly, gave such a slight careless look at doors or street corner that it would never have attracted your attention or mine either for a moment, and had we been there to see we might have wondered why it should attract the attention of Phil, or why he should pursue that cab, running as fast as possible,—for he limped still, poor boy,—doubling the corners quickly, and coming up breathless just as the vehicle he followed stopped at a house door in the next street. The truth was, Phil had recognized certain faint but well-understood indications that the cab was near its destination, and would stop before long, and the boy meant to try for a job, in carrying up the luggage. He had earned an odd sixpence in that way before now.

He must have been out of luck this morning. True, when the door opened no man-servant appeared,—Phil knew he had been right there, knew the house was too humble a one for anything but a parlour-maid. You might be mistaken now and again, he told Jim once, in bigger houses situated in more airy and richer—Phil called them *genteeler*—streets. There was never no telling in those streets, he said, whether a man-servant or only a smart maid would come to the door, but you weren't likely to be mistaken the other way;

no man-servant ever lived in such houses as this cab stopped at.

The maid looked cross too, and the cabman sulky, and not at all inclined to do more than lift the boxes down and leave them standing in the narrow passage. All good for Phil; all so many chances for him. But—was there ever such a trunk as this? Did any trunk ever weigh so much, or be so unwieldy, and so big, and awkward to lift or move? Or was it that Phil was not so strong as he had thought? However that may be, he leaned panting against the wall. The cabman laughed; he had driven a long way and been paid only his exact fare; he was rather glad than otherwise to see the maid's perplexed cross face, and, as some one hailed him at the moment, drove off, laughing still.

"There; get out, do. You ain't no good—not a morsel. Whatever did you come in for?"

The servant-girl pushed Phil angrily on one side and stepped out to look up the street for further help. None being in sight, she said the greengrocer would carry the trunk up to oblige her, by-and-by, and bade Phil be off at once.

He went away without a cloud upon his face,—without a cloud of temper it would be more correct to say, for truly the countenance of honest Phil was greatly obscured by a dark cloud of dirt. It was all fair, he could not stir the box. Leaning against the area rails to rest for a moment, he wondered what could have been in the trunk to make it so heavy, thought how rich the people

must be who rode in cabs and had boxes full of goods like that ; then took to wondering what Jim was about, and what they would have for supper that night, or whether they would have anything at all. After that came the old wonder, where the "other one" could be, and as there was nothing to be done here, Phil decided to go once more to the old place and see whether the other one had come back or had been heard of yet.

Mannington Villas were a long way off ; a job might turn up on the way. There was another cab stopping soon, Phil felt sure of that. Another breathless run, and better luck this time. It was a lodging-house at which the cab had pulled up. The mistress, a sour-looking old woman, welcomed the sight of the boy ; she had no mind to carry upstairs herself the one small corded box her lodger brought with her, and a boy like Phil would expect but a trifle for doing it. A trifle was all she gave him either.

He looked at the two penny pieces rather ruefully, and turned them over in his hand, and then looked up at her with a comical glance of remonstrance.

"Not satisfied!" she said ; "you never are satisfied, you boys ; there, take that then and be off with you."

She had generously added a stray farthing found at the bottom of her purse : Phil went off laughing.

"I'd have tried it on," he told Jim afterwards, "but she weren't one to try it on with ; I see that with half an eye, so there weren't nothing to do but to laugh ; and a farden —why it *is* a farden after all."

Phil found it as hot and stifling as other people did that afternoon; perhaps suffered more from the oppressive atmosphere than those who had frames better nourished and stronger to resist atmospheric influences. Still looking out eagerly for work of any kind, still glancing with those restless eyes of his to right and left of him as he went along, the boy kept on the shady side of the streets as far as possible, or stood idly—idle perforce, and from no choice of his own, poor lad!—at street corners on the watch, hardly more for some chance job that might bring him another penny, than for fear the other one should come by and pass him, and so be lost again.

Once feeling very hungry, as well he might, having tasted nothing since the crusts he had shared with Jim that morning early, Phil stopped at the window of a cook-shop in a poor locality,—a shop, he thought, where things would not be dear, and judging from the specimens in the window they certainly had no right to be dear,—and looked in. But, twopence-farthing! That was clearly not a sum that would admit of the smallest extravagance. Phil could hold out a little longer yet. If he were again in luck, to the extent of another penny say, or even a halfpenny, he might indulge himself then as far as that would go; meantime, evening would surely come, and Jim and he would need a meal of some sort before they slept.

He could hardly tear himself away from the cook-shop though. How good those sausages had smelled

that the other boys brought home last night ! It made his mouth water to remember them. Jim and he might live as well if only they did as others did. It was not work by which the boys had gained money enough to fare sumptuously on sausages and such like savoury food.

“Keep honest, Phil.”

The boy started. Was that his mother's voice, or Jim's ? They both said it so often. But his mother had died long ago, and Jim—*was* Jim dying ?

Phil hurried on again ; he had forgotten the cook-shop now ; was looking eagerly out again for anything to do, any honest way of earning good food for Jim, of continuing to pay the rent so as to keep a roof over Jim's head. A new boy had come in the night before—not a nice boy, he swore very much, and had kept the attic noisy till near daybreak, but he made the eighth in the room and reduced the share that Jim and Phil had to pay to two-pence farthing.

Why ! that was exactly what he held in his hand now ! Who said he was out of luck ? Here was the week's rent off his mind. It made him feel hopeful, made him feel quite rich and independent for a moment—only for a moment ; Jim and he must eat.

There was a momentary confusion in the street, which was crowded just in that place. An omnibus was passing ; a hansom-cab with two ladies in it came rattling down. The horse in another hansom, in the act of turning on to the stand, took fright suddenly, grew restive, reared, plunged,

backed upon the first hansom and smashed the lamp of it. One of the ladies was terrified, with no reason, as Phil saw, laughing. As for the driver he drew his cab up carefully to the curbstone, and left it there while he went across to take the number of the man whose restive horse had caused the injury ; he was sublimely indifferent to the exclamations of his fare. The omnibus passed on safely. Phil saw his chance, or rather, without any thought of reward but intending to allay the fears of the lady,—“ladies being that scared at nothing, as it was a sight to see 'em,” he told Jim,—went to the horse's head and stood there, although such a precaution was quite unnecessary, the animal having no intention of moving, and being only too glad to stand still for any length of time. However, the lady gave Phil a sixpence.

With many people when they have nothing better to occupy their thoughts, it is a favourite dream to imagine what they would do should they come into an unexpected fortune suddenly. No dream, but the reality of this, had come to Phil now. Sixpence ! He and Jim were above want for the day.

“I hadn't worked for it neither,” Phil said to Jim ; “there wasn't no manner of occasion for to hold that 'ere horse, no more than for to hold a lamb : there wasn't nothin' for that 'ere lady to be frightened of, no more than if she'd been a sittin' in her own gold and silver parlour at that there blessed instant, which it couldn't be safer nor more comfortabler neither than that hansom, with red cushions and a good horse in the shafts, and

them little bits of bright blue winder blinds which do make a cab look genteel."

It is not customary, of course, for ladies to sit in gold and silver parlours, but Phil's ideas were rather wild just then, owing to his unforeseen good luck, and it is probable he only meant by the expression to allude to parlours full of all the comforts and luxuries procurable with gold and silver.

It was in that sense certainly that Jim understood him, and as for his not having worked for that particular sixpence, Jim observed that if it had come as a reward for doing a kindness, why it was all the pleasanter to think of.

"I think it was kind of you to go to the ladies' assistance," he said.

"They screeched," said Phil, "leastwise one on 'em did."

He always related the adventures of the day to Jim when the two rolled themselves in the sacks that formed their only bed, and, as they expressed it, turned in for the night, though for that matter Jim was always "in," and had been for so long a time that, anxious as he was to shut his eyes and not look sorrow in the face, Phil really did begin to think Jim would never go out again.

That sixpence was a good omen decidedly. Phil even turned it over to make sure it had no hole in it, which would have accounted naturally for the run of luck that followed, for the storm made his fortune out and out. It mattered nothing at all to him in his ragged clothes that

the rain drenched them through and through in the first moment. His quick eyes looked out for ladies and gentlemen sheltering under porches, and on the watch for passing cabs. Twice did he run halfway down the long thoroughfare and hail a cab, and run back beside it to such groups as these; and though the first time he did so a gentleman only tossed him a penny for his pains, on the second occasion he got no less than a silver threepence for rendering the same service.

A little later, too, when the rain had almost ceased, though it fell softly still, and the streets were very wet, passing a house door, and seeing a neat servant-maid on the steps, where she stood with a very discontented expression on her rosy face, and holding her clean print dress carefully together, while one foot in its neat black shoe ventured to touch the wet pavement, Phil, being a bright boy, and noticing that her hands were full of letters, understood the case at once, and offered to post them for her. As he could do this in the nearest pillar post, and she not lose sight of him the while, the girl gladly consented, and when he ran back to tell her the letters were safe, had found a halfpenny in her pocket, which she gave him smiling.

There was no reason in the world now why Phil should not refresh himself with a hearty meal. Accordingly, he bought a stale sausage-roll, and ate it as he walked along; and if ever there was a hungry boy in London, or one more simply grateful for the means of satisfying his hunger, that boy was honest Phil.

Mannington Villas were in sight now—a row of neat small houses, with little squares of gravel before each door, and situated in a quiet bye-street, which was no thoroughfare, but ended suddenly in three lank poplar trees growing against a dead wall. Having reached the number he was seeking, Phil hesitated for a moment or two before he rang the bell. It was not the first time he had been there, and he felt a little doubtful what reception he might meet with. He went up to the door at last, however. It was opened by the woman of the house herself—a tidy woman, wearing a black stuff dress, and a white apron with pockets in it.

“You here again?” she said. “If ever I see such a boy! What is it you want now?”

“The same thing always, I don’t want nothin’ different to last time. He ain’t come back, I suppose?”

“Who ain’t come back?” she asked.

“The gentleman as lodged here, and as I have done errands for,” said Phil.

“Come back!” She echoed his words scornfully. “Do they ever come back to places such as this? They go up, or they go down, as the case may be. Supposing they’re well off, and not content here, and move to genteeler streets, or to the Square hard by, why that’s up. Supposing they can’t pay no longer for tidy rooms and good attendance in a quiet, airy situation, but move to some poor two-pair back, where there’s only a drab-of-all-work kept, and the cooking isn’t fit to look at, much less to eat, why that’s going down.”

"I should think it was," said Phil, much interested.

"But, back!" She shook her head. "They don't néver come back. I never had a lodger yet as left me, and then came again. Some folks don't know when they're well off, and some can't afford to be well off; that's where it is. Why do you want to see that gentleman particular?"

Phil, after a moment's hesitation, answered that he had a letter for the gentleman, and sought to deliver it safely.

"Post it," said the woman, shortly, with her hand upon the door, and in the act to shut it.

"There ain't no street nor number on it; nothing but the name," Phil exclaimed.

"Post it," she said again; "are you that stupid as not to know the post does everything, finds every one? There ain't nothing can be hidden from the post. Why, they'll open it of course, and send it back where it come from; and them as wrote it will know where the gentleman is, or how to find him, if you don't."

"Supposin' it ain't a letter, but a parcel? Heavyish, too," said Phil anxiously.

"Post it," she said again; "there's nothing now-a-days as can't go by post. It's my belief if you was to post a ton of coal it would get there all right in time."

Phil remained looking at her in some perplexity. Honest as he was himself, it was far from an honest world in which he lived. He did not like to mention to this woman, or to anyone at all, that the parcel he had



"'Post it,' said the woman, shortly."

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spoken of was one containing money. Much as he wished to get rid of it, and get it off his mind, he did not dare entrust it to her,—indeed, why should he? or how would it be any nearer its destination in her hands than in his? When she eyed him sharply, and asked what made him trouble himself so much after all these months about a letter only, he was more than ever determined to hold his tongue, and trust to his own efforts to find the “other one,” if ever he were to be found at all.

“I was to have got fourpence for doin’ of the job,” he said, “and fourpence ain’t a sum as a fellow likes to lose.”

“Well, you take and post your parcel or letter or whatever it may be, and don’t come here no more, for it ain’t no good, and I won’t have boys about.”

With that she shut the door in his face; and after a minute or two, Phil walked off, whistling as he went, and made the best of his way home to Jim.

Such a supper as they had that night, for fortune had continued to smile on Phil, and he had earned a few pence more on the way home, and so soundly as they slept after it—one of them at least. The new boy swore as loudly as ever, the young thieves came in as late as ever, and disputed all night long; but Phil, with his sack about him, and his ragged jacket rolled up by way of pillow, was so tired out, he slept like a top, and never stirred at all. Jim lay so still he might have been sleeping too—or was he too weak to move much, too weak to notice or care much about the noises in the room, which


used to disturb him sadly in the earlier nights of his long illness, but did not seem to trouble him now?

There could not be many nights to come, Jim believed, before that one that would melt for him into the dawn of an endless day. So he lay very quietly and very patiently, now and then dropping off to sleep, but for the most part wide awake, till the daylight of Sunday morning stole into the attic.



CHAPTER XVI.

CHURCH BELLS.

UNDAY morning, and church bells ringing everywhere for service. The air, freshened by the storm of the day before, came in at the attic window and brought the sound of bells with it; Jim lay with a smile parting his lips as he listened.

A critical ear might have detected as many, or more, cracked bells than sound ones, might have found more chimes sadly out of tune than tuneful, more bells that were jangling and discordant than sweet or full-toned, and it may very likely be association only that gives their charm to the noisy city streets on Sundays; for it is "noise" only, so musical people tell us, that crash and clang from every steeple in a city boasting scarcely one peal of bells in tune with one another, or one chime that is in true harmony. But then, it is a noise so different from all week-day sounds, and which,

softened by distance, falls pleasantly upon the ear, hallowed by the associations connected with it, falls so pleasantly upon the heart, that it would be sadly missed if the streets on Sundays were to be silent all day long.

At all events Jim liked to listen to the bells.

"Don't go out to-day," he said to Phil; upon which the boy stared at him in surprise. It was so rare a thing for Jim to ask him to stay at home.

The others were gone already. For the work *they* did Sunday was as good a day as any other, better perhaps, with so many crowded congregations turning out into the streets from church or chapel, so many holiday folk about who were unsuspicious and keeping no particular look-out upon their pockets.

"There's no need to go, is there? We've food for to-day," Jim asked, for it had happened now and then that they had nothing to eat even on Sunday until Phil had earned a trifle with which to procure it.

To-day, however, they were well provided. Phil must needs fetch a stick or two, set light to a fire, and boil some coffee. A hot breakfast was an unusual treat; the only drawback to his pleasure in it now was that Jim did not seem able to enjoy it much.

"I'll take a crossin' this week," Phil said; "we've tried most things, but we ain't tried that, and it don't take much capital for to set up in that line of life. There's the broom to get, and that's about all there is. It will come convenient, you see, for you to

work the crossin' while I'm at some other job, perhaps reg'lar somewhere or other. When first you get about you'll not be *very* strong, you mustn't expect that; a crossin' will be about your mark for a week or two, just till you're fit for harder work."

"Very strong? No, I shall never be that again."

"Nonsense!" said Phil, hastily; "you're stronger every day."

He often said so; more often still, and more emphatically still, as the other grew, not stronger, but daily weaker.

Breakfast over, Phil brought out the Bible that had been his mother's, and read from it as long as Jim cared to listen. Sometimes Phil thought the sick boy was asleep, and then he left off reading, and the sound of the bells filled the room till, by-and-by, the chimes were silent one by one, and the services had everywhere begun.

"How many people are praying now?" said Jim, opening his eyes.

"And how many ain't?" remarked Phil, as, the bells being silent, the noises from the court below were more distinctly audible through the door that would not fasten, which was no great matter, and rather an advantage than otherwise in warm summer weather.

"Mother was a good woman; she learnt me to pray."

"And me," interrupted Phil.

"We've kept straight, as straight as we could, and it will come easier to you by-and-by."

"Of course it will come easier," answered Phil, resolute still in ignoring the other's meaning; "leastwise it is to be hoped so, for it's precious hard now. When a chap's had reg'lar work and lost it, it seems like as though he'd fell out of step and couldn't fall in again nohow, and the rest walk over him."

"It was through looking after me, the time I was very bad, that you fell out of work; I know that, Phil, and I ain't forgot it. I lie here thinking of it often."

"What's the good of doing that?" said Phil, roughly; "who else was there to look after you? There wasn't nothing else to be done far's I could see. If things wasn't in such a tangle, and the world so big and so easy to lose one's way in, I'd have found the other one before now, and we'd have been all right."

"We shall be all right by-and-by," Jim smiled as he spoke.

"Of course we shall. Good food will set you up: we'll both be at work again before the summer's over."

Jim never contradicted him. He knew that Phil was as well aware as Jim was himself that only one of them would need work henceforth. He said now,

"What little chaps we was, to be sure, when we played down in the river mud; always together, Phil."

"And together now; we'll stick together always, Jim, no fear of that: we ain't going to be parted, you and I."

"On Sundays we sat in them free seats near the door in the church round the corner," Jim went on.



"Phil left him no more, but sat by his side patiently."

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"We've sat there a many Sundays since mother's been dead and we was alone together," answered Phil.

"You go this artemoon—I ought not to have kept you from it now, but it felt lonesome," Jim said, by-and-by. And later in the day Phil did leave him for awhile, but came back again before the evening to give Jim his tea, and, finding him disinclined to share even that unusual luxury, and rather wandering in his head, left him no more, but sat by his side patiently. He was sitting there when the bells rang out again for evening service, and their clamour filled the room once more, as it had done in the morning, and drowned the loud voices in the court below. He sat there still when the bells ceased and, as Jim had said, so many people everywhere were at their prayers. He had not moved, nor had Jim (who for hours had been quite silent, no longer wandering, or speaking at all) moved either, when the evening light grew rose-coloured from the setting sun, or when it had passed away and the attic was in darkness. But Phil must have moved a little then, for, when the other boys came in, which they did not do till the first grey dawn of the next day, he was lying with his face hidden on Jim's shoulder, and both of them were asleep, or seemed to be so, for they lay very still and quiet for the next hour or two while the dawn grew slowly, those hours that were always the quietest in that crowded place.

That same Sunday morning little Mary also, wandering in the garden at Clairville, was listening to the bells, the sound of which filled all the summer air. The

garden was one blaze of colour from flowers set in the rich green of the lawn, so carefully watered that it was still fresh and bright; there was deep cool shade from the trees, and the freshened air stirred the leaves with a gentle, pleasant rustling.

Mary had had that dream again, and had been puzzled by it, half afraid of it, not quite believing that it was a dream at all, and yet with no suspicion of the truth. In the bright summer morning on first coming down she had forgotten it. There was the white cat to play with, the unaccustomed treat of making tea, for Mrs. Bannerman allowed the child to pour it out herself, and she—who was in general so particular that the little parlour-maid had been heard to say, water just on the boil and the right quantity of tea leaves only, were “*that* on her mind they would bring her to her grave before her time”—sat contentedly sipping the weak concoction, the result of Mary’s labours, as though she were sipping nectar, and not only made no complaint, but declared she had never enjoyed her breakfast more in all her life.

But breakfast over, and the child being bid to come into the garden and wait there until the last bell should ring, when there would just be time for them to reach the church Mrs. Bannerman was in the habit of attending, Mary remembered her dream, and began to speak of it in an awed, puzzled tone.

“It came again,” she said.

“I told you it would; I told you it came always to children sleeping in this house.”

"To children only ; does it never come to you ? "

Mrs. Bannerman replied rather absently, and speaking more to herself than to her little questioner,

"Night after night *I* dream the same thing, and have done for so long a time. Always the same thing—of some one coming to a child's bedside, and kissing a child's sleeping face."

"And kneeling there to say their prayers," prompted Mary, eagerly.

"Yes ; finding it easier to pray in that place than in any other, weeping there, however dry their eyes may be all through the day, finding the relief of tears by that little bed at night."

"Why, that's my dream !" exclaimed the child ; "or is it yours ? I'll tell you what, I think it *is* yours, and that you *do* it, and so it is you who came to my room last night. People do *do* their dreams when they dream very hard ; I've heard the doctor say so to my mother."

"Nonsense !" the old lady spoke sharply, and in her usual tone ; "what should I come to you for at night ? People *do* their dreams, as you call it, when they've got the nightmare through eating hot suppers and such like follies. There goes the last bell. Come, child."

She took her by the hand, and the two set off together ; but as they passed through a side gate opening from the garden on to the road, Mary observed, regretfully—

"I wish it *had* been you ; I would rather you came and kissed me in my bed : I should not be frightened then. I don't think I like the dreams in this place very much ;"

then struck by a sudden thought, she asked, "Did your little girl have that same dream when she lived here?"

"Of course she had it. Did I not tell you it comes every night to children in this house?"

"Then the house is haunted," said Mary, in the most matter-of-fact tone, and as though that accounted for anything, and was no more improbable than that a house should be inhabited. It seemed a perfectly satisfactory conclusion to have arrived at, and one that left her free to dismiss the whole subject from her mind, which she accordingly did, alluding to it no more, and beginning to prattle of other things.

Haunted? The word struck the mistress of Clairville unpleasantly. Truly the house, standing amidst heaps of building materials, its old companions on either side of it already levelled with the ground, and the strong branches of the magnolia, just now in magnificent foliage, flung across it as though to shield and protect it from a like fate,—truly the house was haunted to her.

How often had she and her own child started from the quaint porch with its two small windows, in both of which there stood a great Dresden china vase, to walk to church together, as she and the little creature with her were doing now? At that door Tom had gone in and out in those days when she had said to herself that she would give her girl to the gay, good-humoured friend to whom she had evidently lost her heart.

"He is a gentleman born, as my own husband was," she thought; "and if I am a tradesman's daughter, Polly is her father all over."

And while she was thinking thus, the young man had stolen her child from her.

From the day on which her daughter, stealing down into the darkened room, and caught there in the act of robbing her mother's desk, had dealt her a blow so cruel that surely none could be sharper or more cruel to a mother's heart, this mother had tried to banish her entirely from her life for evermore. Like Sybilla, but with a determination of which Sybilla's vague impulse to escape her past was but a shadow, Mrs. Bannerman had set herself to break utterly and for good and all with hers. She knew nothing of the family of her son-in-law beyond the fact that his father was a clergyman, and she would make no enquiries. It was nothing to her now who or what he was. Neither he nor his wife ever could be anything to her again.

She was aware that her daughter had a child, or had had one. It might have died, she thought, or it might be living; what matter either way? Perhaps it was a girl like this little Mary Smith, who had taken the lonely woman's heart by storm. For the first time, it had occurred to her that since, even if she had a grandchild living, it must remain a stranger to her always,—on that point there could be no question,—there was nothing to prevent her keeping Mary with her

if she chose to do so. Any one who had lived long enough in this world to know what human nature was, must see the facts of the case, though Miss Blake, by the way, was too simple and too blind to believe them. Mary was deserted and cast adrift; there could be no manner of doubt about it. Mrs. Bannerman might have her for the asking, or, for that matter, without asking, which was simpler still.

Since "those Saxons"—by which title she designated the nephews of her late husband—were too independent to accept her favours on her own conditions, and in refusing them even ventured to teach her duty to her, she would show them that the flourishing business of Merton & Coghlan had no need to go begging. There was nothing in the world to prevent her adopting Mary Smith should she choose to do so; no difficulty, not even should her parents at any time reclaim her; no difficulty that money could not overcome and remove—Mrs. Bannerman felt sure of that.

Looking down upon the little girl, the clasp of whose small hand upon her own had all this time a silent message for her, against which she strove in vain to steel her heart, and saying to herself that in no other way than by adopting Mary could she show more plainly, and once for all, that her daughter was nothing in the world to her, it was strange that Mrs. Bannerman should pass the new church, in which she had taken sittings of late years, and go on to one older and farther off—one in which her infant had been baptized, one in which, as it

grew up, she and the child had knelt together, and which, since her estrangement from her daughter, she had not visited again till now. Strange, too, that kneeling there she should weep silently to see how like Mary's ways were to those of that other child, and that, on reaching home, she should fold her in her arms, and bid her be a good girl to *her* mother always, and that just when she had decided to rob her mother of her altogether. Strange and very inconsistent certainly.

It had been arranged that Sybilla and Doris should come to Clairville after morning service, spend the rest of the day there, and take Mary home with them at night. Doris hardly knew how to understand Sybilla's mood. She was unlike herself, and seemed uninterested even in a tale of distress that Mrs. Custers had brought to their notice early in the morning, and which the sisters had attended to before they went to church.

Sybilla had, indeed, shown all her wonted kindness, and spared no pains or trouble, but had done all in a dull, listless way that perplexed Doris, whose efforts to cheer her seemed powerless that morning. As the sisters walked slowly through the streets towards Clairville, Doris observed how good it was for Mary to be passing so warm a day in the purer air and fresher shade of the old lady's garden.

"And good for Mrs. Bannerman to have the child with her, I feel sure of that," Doris said; "we must let her go there as often as we can, for the time is

short you know : after she is obliged to leave that house, we may lose sight of her entirely."

"We are sure to do so," said Sybilla, wearily and as though making an effort to reply.

"All the more reason to try and make her happier first," said Doris.

"It is not our affair," said Sybilla. "I hardly see what we can do more than we have done, and we seem to have made no impression yet."

"Mary is making an impression : we shall not fail, and it is such a sad thing not to be at peace."

"You are thinking of Tom," said Sybilla, who was certainly thinking of him herself, feeling perhaps that *she*, at least, had little right to preach the duty of forgiveness, and jealously fearful that Doris was judging and condemning her in secret.

"It is not quite the same," answered Doris in the soft deprecating tones that betrayed to her sister's ears how near her suspicions had been to the truth : "we see that strange old woman is unhappy, and she owns it; while you, Syb dear, seem to say it is because we two are so happy in one another that you dread a change."

"I *do* dread a change—*any* change," cried Sybilla; "and surely we have been happy, child?"

She was on the point of speaking of Mary's parentage, if only to prove to Doris that she might have patience, for that *some* change, some intercourse with her brother, must certainly be close at hand. And yet Sybilla could

not bring herself to speak. She would wait still, she thought, for events to shape themselves. She would do nothing on her part to bring back the past she had once thought to leave so far behind her.



CHAPTER XVII.

A QUIET SUNDAY.

NO such thing!" said Mrs. Bannerman. It was afternoon; the church bells had begun, and ceased again; everything was very still in the dull parlour, and very still also in the sunny garden beyond. James Fane, who was frequently in the habit of coming to see his father's old friend when he had leisure to do so, and, indeed, called on her almost every Sunday, had called to-day, and, either the usual precautions with regard to admitting visitors to Clairville had been accidentally neglected, or for some reason or other Mrs. Bannerman had chosen to dispense with them on this occasion, for James found Sybilla and Doris there before him. When they were named to him he had of course made no remark, but the look he turned upon Mrs. Bannerman was sufficiently expressive. It was to that look she replied, "No such thing!"

Doris was amused, though very far from understanding the meaning of the exclamation ; she could not help laughing as her eyes met those of Sybilla's "man with the blue bag." James laughed too, though he had not the least idea why ; perhaps the merriment of Doris was infectious.

"You seem amused," he observed.

"I think I am a little amused to meet you at last," said Doris.

James felt more than ever puzzled. The presence of the child no less than the similarity of name had roused his suspicions, and now the remark of Doris seemed to confirm them. Was she speaking with a hidden meaning,—hidden from Mrs. Bannerman, that is to say, and intended to be clear to him only ? Oddly enough James did not like to think this was the case, or that Doris was playing a part, and had condescended to plots and conspiracies even in a good cause. She looked too frank for such a part he thought, which was one he would have rejected for himself.

"Your sister's face seems familiar to me," he said, glancing at Sybilla, who appeared as constrained and distant in her manner as Doris was the reverse ; "I think I must have met her before, though I cannot recall where it was."

"I can tell you where it was," said Doris ; "it was in the yellow tram one day last spring, a cold, wet, showery day ; and you carried a blue bag."

"Were you there too ?"

Doris, smiling at his bewilderment, shook her head.

"And yet I know all about it, as well as though I had been in the yellow tram myself. There were you, an old gentleman with grey hair, and our little lodger, Mary Smith; no one else at all."

"Your little lodger, Mary Smith," James repeated; still half doubtful as to whether Doris was not merely intending to caution him, and his doubts raised as much by the blushes of Sybilla and the nervousness of her manner as by anything else; "so that is a little lodger?"

"And *not* in a window-pane," observed Mary with great dignity,—she had recognized him at once. "You were rude that day, and spoke about canary birds," she said severely.

"Canary birds! I remember it all now," exclaimed the young man, laughing; "I am glad of this opportunity of making my apologies. It was Alf Bannerman's tramway car," he added, addressing the old lady. "Miss Blake and I, and this little lady, all met in it one day, and never met again till now."

"One of those chance meetings that, according to your theory, Miss Doris, are not owing to chance at all, but have some deeper significance," said Mrs. Bannerman, who appeared wonderfully contented, and as though some plan that interested her was being carried out according to her wishes. "There is no need this meeting should be the last, no reason why you should not all be friends and meet here often. The Miss Blakes are with me constantly," she added to James.



"Finding himself alone with Mrs. Bannerman, James said, 'You are quite sure they are no relation?'"

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"It is a new thing to me to find anyone with you," he answered; "and that little girl, is she——?"

"Yes, *she* is here constantly as well. And what of that?" the old lady cut his sentence short; "it was a quixotic thing to do, of course, to take her in, as these good ladies did, knowing nothing of her; but it has turned out well, very well for me. It is pleasant to see a child about the place."

Little Mary had coaxed Sybilla into the garden, and now called to Doris, who rose and followed them at once; finding himself alone with Mrs. Bannerman, and still unable to divest himself of the idea that had occurred to him on his first introduction to her guests, James said,

"You are quite sure they are no relation?"

"It is a common name enough," she answered.

"He *has* two sisters."

"What if he has? For that matter *they* have a ne'er-do-weel of a brother; I have a dim recollection that they said so once."

"But then——!"

"No such thing, I tell you!" she interrupted sharply; "or even if it were, what's that to me, or to them either? They have given him up as utterly as I have cast *her* off," with an upward glance at the turned picture; "I almost wish they were his sisters. Let them be; let me have that one proof more to give, that *anyone* is nearer to me now than my own child."

James seemed to hesitate for a moment, then forced himself to speak.

"Your daughter has a child, and——"

"And she ought to be here, or so you think, in place of the child I choose to have about me," interrupted the old lady, who, with her inveterate habit of jumping to the conclusion of a speech and answering it at once, did not always hit the mark or the real meaning of the speaker, for that was not at all what James was going to observe. "I have been thinking of keeping this child with me for good and all, of adopting her in fact. You would disapprove, of course."

"I don't know that I should disapprove."

James was still oppressed by the notion that the child had every right to be with the old lady "for good and all," had every claim to be adopted for its mother's sake. His answer seemed to take Mrs. Bannerman by surprise.

"I thought she had one friend left; you pretended that it was so always," she said.

"That is exactly what I came to tell you this afternoon," cried James. "Having been her friend, or rather *yours* when I had never seen her, I am more than ever anxious, having seen her, to befriend you both."

"You have seen her?"

"Yesterday only, and yesterday for the first time. It would not have been fair or honest in me not to tell you so, since you have trusted me with your affairs hitherto, for the very reason that I was personally a stranger to your daughter and to her husband also. I am no longer a stranger to either of them."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Bannerman.

"Having met them, it being probable that I may meet them again,—though I am not sure of that,—I do not more heartily wish well to them, and to you, than I did before; that would be impossible. I am only in the same mind still."

"I must find some other man of business then," she said quietly; "that's all about it. You are a rising man, and can afford, or so it seems, to lose a client."

"I cannot afford to lose a friend."

"You gain two for one. Much good may they do you! And just when you throw me over, James, I was trying to do you a good turn." Her eyes followed the figure of Doris as she crossed the open window at the moment.

"Oh!" said James, laughing a little, "was that the meaning of the introduction? You were trying to do me a good turn. I am very much obliged to you."

"You and myself," she said quickly; "the past being dead and gone, and as though it had never been, why should I not in my old age surround myself with people that I like, and pass the evening of my days in peace?"

"Peace?" He raised his hand, and pointed to the picture.

She paid no attention, but went on speaking rapidly:

"I had fancied you with a young wife, a good wife, worthy of you, James, for you are a good man, and myself welcome in your home. I had fancied my lonely life cheered by a child, who should grow up dutiful and good,

and make me forget that other child who grew up neither, so that in leaving this old house, which, as you know, I must soon do now, I might leave also the ghost that haunts it, and live a new life for the few years left me in this world."

"You can do all this," said James; "what is there to prevent your doing it? what has there been to prevent your doing it this long time past?"

The old lady moved away impatiently.

"Come out," she said; "it was no part of my plan for to-day that Doris should linger in the sunshine by herself and you sit in the shade with me."

"Then you take some little interest in me still?" he asked, half laughing, as they joined the others in the garden.

"It is strange I should do so, or in anyone but myself, after my long experience of the thankless task it is. There's Harold now."

"What has Harold done?" Doris asked shyly. "He is an old friend of ours," she explained to James; "we feel entitled to hear all about him, though I don't suppose we shall ever see him again."

There was something in the tone of her voice, more still in the rich colour that mounted in her cheek when she heard what it was Harold had done now, that told James plainly that his old friend need form no plans in which himself and Doris were concerned.

"He did right; I am sure you think so too," the girl said boldly; "Sybilla and I are quite sure of it."

"Speak for yourself, young lady," exclaimed Mrs. Bannerman; "your sister knows, as I know, the disappointment of seeing one's plans fail right and left."

"It is such a pity to make plans," said Doris.

"Why, what else would you do?" James asked; "everyone makes plans."

"I would let them make themselves; or rather be made for us, and, doing what seems right, walk straight on always, and in no crooked paths."

"But to screen one we love from evil that has overshadowed our own lives; to keep safe and sheltered someone very dear to us; to wish and pray that one life at least might through our means be bright and happy,—surely we may make such plans as those," Sybilla said, looking anxiously at her sister and appearing forgetful of the presence of anyone else just then.

"I would not scheme for such an end as that, Syb; I would rather try to trust the fate of those dear to me—where, and as implicitly as I trust my own."

"The hardest thing in life is to choose between conflicting duties," answered Sybilla, sighing.

"Are there such things?" Doris appealed to James with a bright questioning glance: "Did you ever meet with them? I never did. Only one thing at a time was ever *my* duty since I began to know what duty was at all."

"That is true for all of us," he answered. It was the same thing he had himself said to Alf Bannerman, only Doris had suggested it in other words. "I suspect the

conflict is in ourselves alone. It is not always easy to bring ourselves to recognize a duty, even when we see it before our eyes."

The afternoon passed pleasantly. Only Sybilla was preoccupied and more than usually silent. When Doris whispered to her merrily that the blue-bag-man had got into the story at last, and that she liked him very much, Sybilla found it difficult to give a merry answer in return. As she watched Doris, Sybilla was wishing—oh, how earnestly!—that she could take her away to some quiet place where they two could be alone together still, and where no trouble should ever come to cloud that open brow or dim the sunny eyes Sybilla loved to meet. She felt so miserably certain that when Tom once made himself known to his young sister, the same dreary history would be repeated, the same trust betrayed, confidence misplaced, and this time with Doris for the victim. It seemed hard to Sybilla that, wide as the world was, she should find it impossible to break old ties and live her life in her own way; especially hard since she told herself she had so fully forgiven her brother for the sorrowful years he had cost her, and was so ready to do anything for him, to give him anything if only he would keep away, if only he would leave her and Doris to themselves.

Sybilla did not trouble herself much with speculations as to the "advantage" offered to her by the advertisement. Indeed, when she thought of it at all, she could not help hoping that it might be an advantage that Tom

would be glad to secure for himself, so that he might not care to interfere with his sisters yet. When little Mary, who had grown very fond of her, hung about her now, Sybilla scarcely knew whether she loved the child more or less for knowing whose blood ran in her veins. It was so wrong to teach the little girl to deceive, Sybilla considered, and wondered drearily as she watched the child how much or how little Mary knew, and to what extent Tom, who always had led people wrong, was guiding the steps of his own child astray. What had he done it for? What could have been his object? Sybilla repeated the questions to herself again and again, and could only come to the conclusion that the pressure of want had suggested to Tom to transfer a burden to Sybilla's shoulders that began to weigh unpleasantly upon his own. That would be like Tom. But surely he might have known, *did* know, that the child would have been not the less, but all the more willingly received for coming in her own name.

It is more than probable that had Sybilla at this time been open with Doris and told her all she knew herself, the quicker wits of the younger sister would have found a solution of the mystery before this. Sybilla, always more or less wrapped up in melancholy brooding over the past, and from the very fact that her one engrossing object was to keep Doris from ever having a sad past to brood over, was apt to be blind to much that went on around her. Never blind to distress that she could minister to in any way, never deaf to any call for pity,

still in other things that were at all out of the way, or at all new to her experience, she did not see so clearly as Doris did, whose vision was utterly unclouded by any thought of self.

There was another cause for Sybilla's mood this afternoon.

That morning on leaving, to go to church, the scene of distress to which Mrs. Custers had summoned them, the good woman had volubly assured the sisters that, if ever prayers went straight to Heaven and were heard at once, theirs were sure to be so.

"Don't you spend your life in doing good to the Lord's poor? and isn't that a sacrifice as is sure to be accepted and bring a blessing on you?" she had said; and Doris had listened smiling, and in no humour just then to improve the occasion by holding forth upon the inefficacy of works.

"We have to listen to a sermon ourselves to-day," she said to Sybilla; "and after all, what Mrs. Custers says is true of you, Syb dear; and she does not see *how* true of herself."

Sybilla had made no comment at the time, but had felt conscious, as she and Doris joined in the familiar service, of a restful peace that had its root in the thought that they did try to do their part towards their fellow-creatures, and might humbly hope the work of their lives was not wholly unacceptable. But then came the sermon. Doris, who had totally forgotten the speech of the poor charwoman,—from whom, indeed, she was well

accustomed to speeches of the kind,—leant back in the corner of the seat, a sunbeam rested on her hair, and she looked as she always did look in church, as though all thought of self was lost and merged in the consciousness of God's presence. When the text was given out, Doris was startled by a hasty movement of Sybilla's; for a moment Doris fancied her sister was ill or faint, but she made a reassuring sign and kept her seat, only turning her face away from Doris and shading it with her hand.

"Leave there thy gift before the altar; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift."

The words rang in Sybilla's ears.

"What did you think of the sermon?" she asked, when the sisters had left the church and were walking towards Clairville.

It was so seldom that they discussed the sermon at all,—Sybilla having an old fashioned notion which she had instilled into Doris also, that it was better to listen humbly than to criticise,—that Doris was a little surprised at the question.

"Were you thinking of poor Mrs. Bannerman?" she said. "I do believe she is a good woman. How odd it is that good people cannot *see* the plainest duties sometimes! But after all one has no right to apply the sermon to other people; there was quite enough in it that was applicable to oneself."

In saying this, Doris was only innocently rehearsing a lesson her elder sister had taught her from her youth up; alluding only to herself, and her own sins,—plain

enough to Doris always, however difficult other people might find it to discover a fault in her. Sybilla, however, relapsed into silence. The jealous fear that Doris was judging *her*, condemning *her*, made itself felt once more, and added bitterness to the humiliation with which Sybilla had taken to her own heart the lesson of the preacher in such startling contrast to the words of poor Mrs. Custers. Sybilla could not shake off the impression, for all that afternoon, and it may have been well for her that she found it impossible to do so.

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"Mrs. Custers was just starting for her weekly half day at the Red House."

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CHAPTER XVIII.

A STERN JUDGE.

MONDAY morning rose fair and bright.

“It will be warmish by-and-by, but 'taint by-and-by yet, and early hours is cool to work in,” observed Mrs. Custers, who was just starting for her weekly half-day at the Red House, to a friend of hers in the same way of business as herself.

The friend yawned and stretched herself.

“Ain't it *too* early?” she said.

“Not for where I'm going to. I grant you there *is* doors as you may knock at after seven when you was bid come at six, and never find 'em open then, nor not before eight neither. But the ladies ain't that sort, and don't keep no servant to lie abed, and come down frowsy to let a body in on charin' days, and to put off every bit of work they anyways can *till* them days, so as to make charin' come heavier than it need. Oh, I know their ways!”

"Warmish," to use the expression of Mrs. Custers, it certainly was, even then, in the close atmosphere of the Court. When she had reached the entrance, the good woman sniffed the air in the open street, as though she found it sweet by contrast with that she had breathed all night. There was a fight going on amongst the boys behind her, but that was nothing new; she hardly so much as turned her head, till one of them, who seemed to have suffered in the fight,—for his ragged jacket showed new rents in it, and his face was bleeding from some savage blow,—ran past her, and pushed up against her roughly. She called to him to mind what he was about, and then went on her way along the street, in the same direction which he too had taken, though he was soon far ahead of her, and in another moment out of sight altogether.

A little later, Tom, after a few cheerful words to his wife, had set out for the meeting at the solicitor's office, a meeting on which he built so many hopes, that he felt a rich man already, as he walked the street.

"The crisis is at hand," he had called gaily to his wife, as he parted from her; and she had answered that she hoped it might be so at last, for it had been long in coming. She had more misgivings than Tom himself entertained, as to what good the crisis, as he called it, was to bring when it did come, beyond indeed the good of bringing Mary back to them. That was at least one bright spot in the horizon, and she would try to dwell upon the thought of it all day.

Tom, having reached his destination, was surprised to find no one had been on the same errand there before him. He met with a very cool reception, moreover, and found that, after proving his identity to the satisfaction of the solicitor, he would have further still to go, and, in fact, was furnished only with the address of his uncle at a West End hotel.

"Why could he not have appointed the meeting there at once?" asked Tom, with a little not unnatural impatience, for time was precious to him.

The man of business shrugged his shoulders in pity at Tom's ignorance.

"And if he had done so, how many Thomas Unwin Blakes, how many Sybillas, and Doris Rachel Blakes would have called on him by now?" he asked, with a tone of contempt and superior wisdom, that chafed Tom exceedingly. He wished he had not put the question, for of course the solicitor was right.

"I understand that," Tom said; "of course it is better for you to examine claims and only send on to him such as are justifiable."

"You represent your sisters also, I presume?"

Tom scarcely knew how to reply, though it struck him pleasantly that, had the advertisement escaped the eyes of Sybilla and Doris, he might be the means of bringing good news to them, which would be almost as well as to have met them in this place, and would furnish a more than reasonable excuse for a visit to the Red House.

"I represent their interests, I suppose," he said ; "but we have not met for years."

"Indeed. Well, all that can be explained to our client. If your sisters call here they will be furnished, as you have been, with his address. We are not entitled to do more than give that address ; our commission ends there."

It was something to discover that his suspicions were correct, and his uncle was the advertiser, for more than that the man of business either could not or would not tell him. Had Tom overheard the remark made as he left the office, he might have been enlightened as to the reason of his cool reception, and the evident distrust of him ; might even have begun to dread the results of an interview he had hitherto felt so convinced would brighten all his prospects.

"Their interests !" the solicitor said, half aloud ; "I only hope they may be safe in your hands. I wish the women had been the first to appear. It is the old story ; the ne'er-do-well scents money at once, and puts in his claims without delay."

Since Robert Blake had sufficiently recovered to look into his own affairs, and undertake for himself those inquiries he had once expected to leave only to the lawyers after his death, he had learnt enough of his nephew's past life to make him very distrustful of his future. It was merely as a matter of justice, and to satisfy his own conscience, that he had joined Tom's name with that of his sisters at all. Robert Blake

knew now that if he had felt such deep regret when standing by his brother's grave in Courtfield churchyard, his brother's only son might well water that grave with his tears.

"He is sure to turn up, no doubt in the world as to that," thought the returned traveller; "but he shall reap as he has sown. The fortune I hoped to share with his poor father shall not be squandered by one who brought his gray hairs with sorrow to the grave."

And then he wondered where his nieces were, and wished, as the solicitor had wished, that they, and not Tom, might be the first to appear.

It was now the height of the London season, a fact that had so very little to do with any of the personages of this tale that it is more than probable not one amongst them remembered it was the season at all. A constant stream of carriages rolled along Regent Street and enlivened Portland Place, though the glories of that spacious thoroughfare have somewhat diminished of late years, and the tide of fashion has set in other directions. Gaily-striped awnings stretching here and there across the pavement, betokened that more than one morning party was going on; his disturbed slumbers at the Langham Hotel had sufficiently informed Robert Blake that evening parties had gone on all night. To his eyes the world around him seemed a very idle and dissipated world indeed. Where were the workers? he asked himself indignantly.

“Day and night, all night long, and all day long as well! What a turmoil it is! I’d rather be a day labourer than toil so hard at pleasure as all this.” Which was a cynical remark by the way, for the toilers before him were amusing themselves innocently enough just then; most of them had their hours of work as well as play, and if in the world they lived in there were not so many opportunities for the interchange of charitable offices, or for deeds of quiet heroism as—let us say, for instance, as in Fish Court—still Robert Blake had certainly no grounds for imagining that the few there were of such opportunities were neglected or passed over.

Walking slowly homewards towards his hotel, and being perhaps pre-occupied with his own thoughts, or possibly merely a little confused and distracted by the turmoil around him, Robert Blake very nearly got knocked down by a hansom, that was, after the fashion of its kind, turning a corner at full speed,—would have been quite knocked down had not some one pulled him back hastily, and without any ceremony at all, on to the pavement he had just quitted.

“That was a narrow escape,” said the stranger; “you should keep a sharp look-out at the crossings.”

“It would have been the worse for the driver of that cab if he *had* knocked me over,” said Robert Blake, angrily. “I suppose there is law in the land still; though so much else has changed since I was last at home, I suppose the law is left. It would have been the worse for him.”

"And for you too, I suspect," the stranger answered, laughing; "you are not accustomed to these thronged and busy streets."

"Thronged, I grant you, but 'busy!' what are they all about? What good is it all? What purpose does it serve?"

"It's good for trade; you grant as much as that, I hope."

"Riches and poverty so close together; the richest city in the world, and yet the poorest too, with this canker of pauperism in its heart. So many problems worked out or touched upon in these days, when the brains of men are as busy—busier than their hands, but that problem never touched or worked out at all," said Robert Blake, musingly, and standing still just under the church in Langham Place, to the right of him some of the poorest and most wretched of all London streets, in front of him the display of wealth enough, or so he fancied, to make the whole city rich.

"You are wrong there. People do work to that good end, and a better day for the poor will dawn at last."

"It is a long night first."

"Wherever you may have been, you cannot have seen nobler charities than ours."

"Or so great need of charity," the other interrupted. "I have lived where men had room to breathe, where lots were more equal, where there was not this great gulf fixed between rich and poor that I find here. You,

standing, I presume, safe upon one side of it, do not recognize or understand how great a gulf it is."

"I know something of the other side too," the stranger answered, with a smile; "and I know how often the gulf you speak of is bridged over by a kindly outstretched hand. After all, big as the world is, and over-crowded here in England, there is room always for a man to make his way, if only he keeps on a straight course."

"You have found that out, have you? It is a rule that holds good everywhere, in my experience, and I am an oldish man now."

"Having found it out only lately, perhaps I have no right to speak, but I do believe poverty, *in itself*, is not the evil people sometimes think it, and that the poor—even the very poor are as happy often as——" he waved his hand with a slight gesture towards the passing carriages as he spoke.

"You have studied the subject then?"

"I haven't studied *any* subject, I'm afraid," he answered, with a laugh; "but when once he *has* opened his eyes, life teaches a man a lesson or two without much study. Shall we cross over?"

"You mean to see me safely to the other side, do you? Well, having perhaps saved my life just now, you have a right to look after me, if you choose, and if we are going the same way."

"I am going to the hotel; I have an appointment there."

"To the Langham! Why, bless my soul! Can you

be Tom? The living image of your father too! Where have my eyes been all this time? Bless my soul! shake hands, boy. So you are Tom!"

It was by no means the sort of welcome he had intended to give his nephew, and he remembered almost immediately that it was not, but it was too late then to put on the frigid reserve with which he had meant to meet him. In his excitement and delight, moreover, he nearly got run over a second time. Tom was glad when they were safely landed at the hotel door and mounting the steps together.

"You are not at all the sort of fellow I expected to see," his uncle remarked, when they had reached his room, which, as Tom was quick to notice, was one of the best in the house.

"And yet you said I was so like my father."

"In looks—in looks, I meant: like him in nothing else, by all I have heard of you."

"You cannot have heard worse than the truth," said Tom, resolutely.

His uncle shook his head. He tried to forget his warm greeting of this plausible nephew, and to assume the severe deportment he had resolved upon before they met.

"Your sisters?" he began.

"Of them you can have heard nothing but good," said Tom; "they deserve anything you can do for them."

"Anything I can do for them! And it is in hopes of my doing something for you that you come here

to-day, I suppose ? Tell me where your sisters are, what *you* have done for them ; tell me the history of your lives, that I may see what claim you have on me, beyond the claim of mere relationship."

The account Tom gave was truthful ; Robert Blake knew that by comparing it with all he had learnt and discovered for himself ; and as he listened to his nephew, a plan occurred to him for testing the young man, who certainly impressed his uncle more favourably than he had supposed would be the case.

"Who am I, that I should be hard on you ?" he said when Tom ceased speaking ; "I, who added to your father's troubles, and stood aloof from him through those years when who knows if even your own career might not have been the better for my influence and my help ? Still, hearing all I had heard of you, I had in my own mind set your claims upon me against those of one who, with no tie of blood between us, has been as a son to me ; against one whose life has been upright and honest from the first, who has rendered me from time to time services no money could repay, and, beyond any service, has cheered my lonely life with affection and companionship for these five years past. Of course I shall provide for your sisters ; that done, have you, or has this man I speak of, the greater claim upon me for what remains ?"

It was a hard question for Tom to answer, and his uncle liked him the better that he did not attempt to answer it at once.

"Look back at the past," Robert Blake went on; "so much done for you, and what return? Stand in imagination where I stood lately, in Courtfield churchyard——"

Tom interrupted him :

"Standing in imagination by my mother's grave, I can ask you for nothing, sir," he said.

"Is it 'nothing' if I take from your shoulders the burden of care for your sisters, that ought to rest there, but never has done so yet? You have a wife and child, you tell me. Surely you can provide for them yourself?"

"I have done so since my father died, and have asked help of no one."

"It has been a weight upon my mind that I ought to make some return to the man I told you of just now, but I determined first to see what your claims were, and whether it was true that, as I heard on all sides wherever I inquired about you, you had forfeited all claim on me at all."

"I may have done so in the past—I *have* done so; if my sisters are provided for, I waive all claims for myself. Indeed, what choice have I?" Tom added, smiling; "we can only, all of us, bow to your decision. But you do not cast me off; you will let me see you now and then; you will not, for my father's sake, disown the relationship between us?"

"No, no, of course not!" Robert Blake began to find it hard to play the part he had allotted to himself. Tom was more and more unlike what he had expected to find

him, and more and more like his father every moment. "I only want to see my way to repaying Harold Bannerman the services——"

"Harold Bannerman! why he is my wife's first cousin!" Tom exclaimed.

"What a small world it is after all!" said Robert Blake. "One is for ever running up against people one has known and heard of. Perhaps there is some magnetic influence afloat that attracts to each other those atoms that have any interests in common."

He asked a few questions, which led to the new disclosure that Tom and his mother-in-law were not on speaking terms, and why. Tom attempted no concealment; he narrated the whole story of his secret marriage, even told how, not that alone, but a worse and meaner fault, had separated mother and child, and kept them apart ever since.

"It was downright robbery!" said his uncle.

"Something very like it," Tom acknowledged, though a few years before he would have been indignant at hearing the transaction called by its right name. "Of course we did not say so to ourselves at the time. The money was some her mother had mentioned to her daughter as being set apart for her use, and had consulted with her how she would wish it spent. It would have tided me over a sore pinch, and in another day or two we should have confessed everything—our marriage and everything else."

"I do not understand why the marriage should have

been secret : I should have thought there could be no objection, rather the reverse."

"No objection to myself, perhaps," said Tom, with a half smile ; "but my affairs could hardly have been called in a flourishing condition. Mrs. Bannerman is a woman of business, she would have looked into matters, and those who make their money are often doubly careful where it goes to."

"I am glad you recognise that fact," said his uncle, dryly.

Tom went on : "She was so fond of her daughter, I thought I might——"

"Steal her with impunity," interrupted Robert Blake ; "and you are the man who told me awhile ago that there was room enough in this crowded world for anyone to get on in so long as he kept a straight course !"

"I am that man ; and Harold Bannerman's life has been true and upright from the first,—or so you said," replied Tom, bitterly. "There is a hard road to travel if one would retrace one's steps, but not harder than a strong will and an honest pair of hands, at last, if not at first, uncle, may enable a man to get over."

"Mrs. Bannerman, will see *me*, I presume ?"

"As a friend of her own nephew, I suppose she might. My sisters are there constantly."

"How comes that about ?"

"I don't pretend to understand it," Tom said. "Very likely she does not know who they are ; ours is not an uncommon name."

He explained that his child was with Sybilla, and in what hope he had sent her there, and submitted with a good grace to be scolded for the deceit he had practised upon his sisters. To tell the truth, Robert Blake was rather relieved than otherwise to find something in the present on which he could animadvert with at least a little of the severity which he had intended to display towards Tom altogether. Robert Blake's own conscience was so far from clear with regard for the past, that he scarcely felt justified in being severe with any man for what was over and done with, especially with any man avowedly endeavouring to retrace his steps as Tom was now.

It was decided that Tom should call on his sisters and prepare them to receive a visit from their uncle, and having furnished him with the address of Mrs. Bannerman, Tom left the hotel, intending to reclaim Mary on his way home, that the day might have at least so much pleasure in it for his wife as that would bring. He had, however, business to attend to, so that it was drawing on towards evening before he found himself at liberty to set out for the Red House.



CHAPTER XIX.

MISSING !

“**S**HE hadn’t ought to be left, and that’s a fact; I’d have stayed myself if it had been anywhere else but here as I was coming to, and if I hadn’t wanted money too, and that’s the truth, ladies, and I’ve made up my mind to see after her when I leave this, just for an hour or so if no more.”

Mrs. Custers, deep in soap-suds, and with little Mary hard at work, or playing at work, beside her, was speaking of the poor creature Sybilla and Doris had befriended the day before, and after whom they had inquired almost as soon as Mrs. Custers arrived that morning.

“You can’t lose your time in staying with her,” Doris said.

“No more I could if there wasn’t a set of rooms empty in the very house, and I with luck enough to get the job to clean ’em,” Mrs. Custers answered. “I can do that,

and look in and out on the poor soul as convenient as may be."

"And we will go round this morning," said Sybilla, "and see that she wants for nothing. I don't know what we should do without you, Mrs. Custers; but for you we never should have heard of this poor thing at all."

"I hope she will be in the hospital before night," observed Doris; "we must go again and ask for that order of admittance promised us yesterday. I thought it would have been sent at once, and expected to find it here when we got home last evening."

"There ain't many as does a kindness out of hand," remarked Mrs. Custers, thoughtfully, as she wrung out a sheet, and Mary, intently watching her, imitated every action with a towel, and felt a laundress every inch of her. "They seem to consider as the poor can wait; and they do wait patient, I must say; they ain't got much else to do, a good many of 'em."

It was too warm to take Mary to the Court, or on the quick long walk to the house of the lady who was a subscriber to the hospital Doris had mentioned, and whom they had the day before begged for an order; the little girl was left at home with some quiet occupation, to which she was bidden to attend when Mrs. Custers should have gone. Till then Mary had free leave to help in the washing, or in any other way she pleased.

"We shall be home so soon after twelve ourselves that the child will not be lonely," Doris remarked, as the

sisters left the Red House and set out together as soon as the first press of work was over for the day.

Little Mary opened the door for them, and stood watching until they were out of sight.

"How lonely the place would be without that little figure to welcome us when we come home, and to watch us when we go away," said Doris.

"We must not count on keeping her always," said Sybilla.

"I thought you *did* count on it! But I never understand you when you speak of Mary Smith. We ought to be going to the solicitor's office, Syb. I wonder whether Tom is there."

"Of course he is there." Sybilla wondered what connection there could be in the mind of Doris between the thought of Mary and of Tom, that those two remarks of hers should have followed one another so closely.

"Perhaps he will come to us; but does he know where we are?"

"He knows that well enough. How often am I to tell you that Tom will have no difficulty in finding us whenever it is to his advantage, as the advertisement says, to do so!"

Once in the poverty-stricken room to which their errand led them, Sybilla forgot Tom and everything else in the scene before her, and when she and Doris left it for the walk they had still to take, they had too much to think of and to plan for their poor friend to remember their own affairs or think of themselves at all. By the time

they had secured the order,—Doris felt a little provoked to find that the lady "*thought* it had been sent the night before, and was surprised to find it on her table still,"—returned with it to the Court, and made arrangements for the removal of the patient in whom they were interested, the sisters were tired out, and glad to walk very slowly home again.

Their business had taken more time than they supposed. It was now long past noon. The first remark Doris made as they came in sight of the Red House was, how hungry Mary would be by this time, especially since on Monday mornings they all rose earlier than on other days. The next thing she said was, that the child had not had the thought to pull down the green blinds, and that the house would be very hot.

It was hot—stifling ; for the sun was beating full upon it. It was very silent too. Mary did not come to meet them as they entered, nor was she in the parlour, where the window was wide open, and the warm, close air filled all the room. Doris, remarking that it was odd the child had not heard them enter, went to look for her upstairs.

"I strongly suspect she has fallen asleep in some quiet nook," Sybilla said, smiling, as she sunk down, exhausted with the heat, in the great arm-chair.

Little Mary was nowhere upstairs, and Doris, beginning to feel rather nervous, went below. It was cooler here. The back door was open : the place was darker than the rest of the house, and with less sunlight there

was less heat. Everything was tidied up and left in the perfect order in which Sybilla insisted that Mrs. Custers should have everything below before she went away herself. The clothes drying in the small back-yard hung motionless in the still air. Doris even went out and peeped amongst the wet folds of the sheets, as though to make sure the little girl had not fallen asleep in that unlikely place. Wherever she was she could not be asleep now, Doris thought, for her name had echoed through the silent house ever since the sisters had come in.

"She must have run out," Doris said, as she rejoined Sybilla in the parlour.

"I do not like her doing that," Sybilla observed, uneasily.

"And in all this heat, too!" Doris began; then broke off suddenly to exclaim how tidy the room was.

"Why should it not be tidy?" asked Sybilla.

"But it is exactly as we left it after breakfast,—the chairs all in their places, nothing moved or disturbed, no books about. Here is her slate and copy-book, where they were put last night; her little workbox has not been opened. Syb, she has not been in this room at all since we left the house."

"What of that?" Sybilla tried to speak carelessly, but the anxiety of Doris was beginning to infect her also.

"It was the same upstairs, now I come to think of it," Doris went on; "but for her little trunk standing against

the wall, and an apron neatly folded lying on a chair, and her small pair of boots beneath it, the spare room is as neat and trim as though no one inhabited it at all, much less a child."

"Boots!" exclaimed Sybilla; "are her boots there, did you say? Then she cannot have gone out, or not far off; she will be back directly."

Doris, remarking that she did not like the unnaturally tidy appearance of the house, went away to take off her walking things, but came back almost immediately, and wearing her bonnet still.

"Her hat is hanging on the peg behind the door!" she exclaimed. "She cannot have gone out without her hat. What *has* happened to her, Syb?"

"Mrs. Custers was here till twelve; Mary has not been long alone," answered Sybilla, getting up to look from the window.

"Mrs. Custers left at twelve, and it is now nearly two; the child has been almost two hours alone," said Doris; "I feel frightened for her. It would be as well to ask Mrs. Custers exactly when she went away, and whether Mary was safely at home then,—better to ask her, if only to set our own hearts at rest."

We will,—we will go at once. Still, Mrs. Custers said nothing about Mary when we passed her on our way out of the Court. She must have been home some time then. However, we will go."

"We?" repeated Doris. "*I* shall go. One of us must stay at home, if only to see about dinner for the

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"The last I see of her was standing that pretty on the doorstep, as she looked like a picture in a frame."

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child when she comes in, and that one must be you. You are tired out already, Syb.

Sybilla, though still declaring she felt sure Mary had run out only for a moment and would be back directly, agreed that it should be as Doris wished, only suggesting that inquiries should first be made at the shop, where the child now and then went to buy a pencil or a sheet of drawing paper, and at the house next door. In neither place, however, could any tidings be obtained. She had not been seen at Merton & Coghlan's, and although the woman next door said she had noticed the child standing at the door, and watching the sisters as they walked away that morning, she had her own business to attend to, and had not noticed whether the little girl ran out or not later in the day.

"The last I see of her was standing that pretty on the doorstep, as she looked like a picture in a frame; and to think, poor little soul! as she is lost in London streets since then!" the woman said, with the keen relish of a coming misfortune, which did not concern herself, so common to her class.

"We will hope she is not lost," Doris said to Sybilla; "but it does seem as though Mary Smith were spirited away from us as mysteriously as she came to us at first."

While her sister was away there was at first enough to occupy Sybilla to prevent her dwelling very much upon her anxiety about the child, whom indeed she half expected to see at any moment. As time wore on, however, she began to dread lest any harm had befallen

the little creature who, for her own sake, had grown dear to Sybilla. At every instant she left what she was about for that hopeless watching from the window that never yet brought any one more quickly back, but which it is so impossible to resist, whenever a looked-for coming is long delayed. An hour had passed; it would take Doris nearly that time to go and return from Fish Court, but Sybilla began to expect her now, and to look and watch anxiously for her also, as well as for Mary. She made arrangements for the comfort of both of them. Doris would come home so tired, Mary certainly so hungry. And then Sybilla thought of Tom. What would he say or do if harm befell the child while under Sybilla's care? For one moment the thought of her brother added to her distress; in the next, she gave a sigh of relief, the worn, anxious look passed from her brow, she set about her concluding preparations for dinner with a renewed cheerfulness that would undoubtedly have surprised Doris had she been there to see.

That she was *not* there, was beginning to perplex Sybilla, and indeed to fill her with some vague alarm, when the very unusual sound of a cab stopping at the door attracted her attention, and she hurried to the window in time to see Doris herself pay and dismiss the driver. Doris was alone.

"Yes, I know," she began, as Sybilla went to meet her; "I know it was a piece of reckless extravagance, but what *could* I do? I thought of you here alone,

and perhaps getting anxious about me also. Mrs. Custers was stupid for once in a way, Syb. She says she thought the child went out with us before ten o'clock."

"How can she have thought that?"

"Mary never went back to her downstairs; and it did not strike Mrs. Custers that the child was not with us when she met us later. If she had spoken then, so much time would not have been lost. And oh, Syb, Mary is not at Clairville either!"

"At Clairville?" repeated Sybilla.

"I thought she might have taken a fancy to go there by herself."

"Without hat or boots?"

"Had I time to think of hat or boots?" Doris asked, impatiently. "I only remembered she was missing, dear little thing! and actually I took a cab and drove there and back. They had not heard of her. They are—the old lady and the little maid, both of them—as distressed as we are."

"I wish you would rest and have something to eat, Doris," Sybilla said quietly. It was strange that as the anxiety of Doris increased that of her sister seemed to lessen or to be lost in her care for one dearer to her than even Mary. "You will make yourself ill, child. For my sake, rest and eat."

"There was a death in the house where Mrs. Custers was cleaning," Doris said, wearily, as she sat down at last, and tried to take some of the food Sybilla had

prepared; "she was more interested in that than in Mary's disappearance; but I had not the heart to stay and hear all about it then, and the dead do not need us. I cannot bear to think of a lost child in London, Syb!"

The eyes of Doris were full of tears; instead of Sybilla being the one to be nervous and upset, as was generally the case when any accident or misfortune overtook the sisters, it was Doris who could scarcely command herself, and Sybilla who was calm and composed.

"I feel quite sure Mary is not lost," she said.

"Then what has become of her? If she is not lost she has met with some dreadful accident or other, or what can it be that keeps her out like this?"

"Remember," said Sybilla, "how steady and wise the little woman is, how capable of caring for herself, how independent in her ways, and accustomed to go about alone. How often have you yourself sent her out alone, and the very day on which I met her first——"

"Sent!" Doris broke in upon the slow, tranquil speech of Sybilla,— "that is just the difference. No one sent her to-day. When you first came across her, odd and unaccountable as it seemed to find a child like that looking for lodgings, she had all her instructions given her, knew just what to do, and was only saving her mother trouble by seeing the rooms before she went to see them herself. How can you compare the two things, Syb?"

"I don't compare them ; I only say that for a child such as Mary is, it is a far less serious matter to be lost sight of and unaccounted for than it would be for one less helpful, less womanly in her ways."

Doris sighed.

"I am going to Mr. Bunter," she said, with decision.
"You will not refuse to let me question him now?"

"You shall question any one you like if only you will eat and drink, and keep still for a little while first. You remarked just now that it seemed as though Mary were spirited away as mysteriously as she came. Does it not occur to you it may be by the same agency?"

"Does it occur to you?" Doris opened her eyes widely.

"It did occur to me while I waited for you here alone. If those who left her here—for their own convenience, Doris—have recalled her suddenly, what would there be so very strange in that?"

It was now the turn of Doris to remind Sybilla of the hat and boots.

"And her trunk—all her clothes ! Who would have taken her away without anything at all?" she said.

Sybilla could not help fancying that the poor wardrobe of his little daughter would not be a matter for much consideration in the eyes of Tom, if he had suddenly become a rich man, and that it would be exactly like him, after having made a convenience of herself and Doris, to carry off the child when the whim took him to do so, without any thought of their feeling in the matter.

Or it might be her mother who had come secretly and taken her away. Till Doris was a little quieted, a little rested and refreshed, Sybilla would say nothing to her of all this. Perhaps, too, Sybilla still half-unconsciously held fast to her determination of letting events shape themselves, and waiting to see what time would bring. She felt convinced, and repeatedly assured Doris of her conviction, that tidings of Mary would reach them before long. In her own mind she said to herself that the distress of her young sister upon the child's account was only the first sorrow brought upon Doris by Tom, only the first of all the many sorrows he was destined to bring upon her as upon everyone whose path touched his. As the afternoon wore away, Sybilla almost began not to hope, but to fear, that each succeeding hour would bring news of Mary, and to be more and more assured that the child was with her father.

In the meantime Doris, instead of growing calmer, grew more and more distressed. In obedience to Sybilla, and also because she knew not what else to do, she tried to wait patiently.

"I did not know how fond I was of her," she said, "or how terrible it would be to lose her. It *would* be terrible, Syb, to lose a child in our care; we should always feel as though it were in some way our fault."

"It has not been in the least our fault," said Sybilla.

"You don't seem to care; I cannot make you out, Syb."

"You should not quarrel with me for caring more to

see you so distressed, so unlike yourself, and upset altogether, than to have Mary missing for an hour or two," Sybilla said. "You should not quarrel with me because you are dearer to me than anyone else in all the world, and have been for so long. To lose you, or to lose your affection, Doris, would be what *I* could not bear."

"There is no question of that," said Doris. "Oh, Syb, let me go and ask for the address of Mary's people—Mr. Bunter must know it. If they have reclaimed her, it is cruel of you to keep me in suspense."

"Go and ask Mr. Bunter anything you like," answered Sybilla, with a sad smile, "but kiss me first, Doris, and say good-bye, before you leave me."

"Such a solemn leave-taking! just to go and ask a question next door," Doris said, smiling too, and stooping to kiss Sybilla as she had been bidden; "just to go and ask for Mr. Smith's address!"

"It will be of no use your asking for Mr. Smith," said Sybilla, detaining Doris as she would have left her side.

"No use! you still think Mr. Bunter does not know the address of Mary's father?"

"He may know that; but you must ask for Mary's father in his own name—our name. Oh, Doris, are you sure it has never crossed your mind that she is Tom's child?"



CHAPTER XX.

AFTER LONG YEARS.

DORIS stood transfixed. For a moment she hardly believed she could have heard aright; in the next a look of tenderest pity and affection came into her eyes, and she knelt down by Sybilla in the old loving attitude, caressing her with the childish gesture to which she always responded.

"You think more of him than you will own," Doris said; "in your own heart, dear Syb, you think as much of him as I do. How I blame myself that I have misunderstood you all this time and thought you cold towards him,—towards him only of all you have ever known! I see now that you dwell and brood too much upon the thought of Tom, or you never would have taken so strange and wild a fancy."

Doris had not understood that Sybilla had spoken the simple truth.



"Doris knelt down by Sybilla in the old loving attitude."

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"It is no fancy," she said now; "the child you love so much is your own niece, Doris."

"You knew it! and you never told me!"

"I have known it for less than one week, and I have meant to tell you every day."

"I think I deserved that you should tell me." Doris had risen and moved away; there was a pained tone in her voice; she felt a movement of not unreasonable indignation towards her sister, which Sybilla was instantly aware of. It was the first cloud between Doris and herself, and in her own mind Sybilla unjustly accused Tom of causing it.

"I recognised the likeness in the child's locket," she went on in a hard, constrained voice, "that night when she cried herself to sleep: it is not so very long ago, Doris; I have not kept the secret from you many days."

Any momentary vexation Doris may have felt had already passed away. She was smiling, though looking bewildered still.

"Tom married! That had never occurred to me. When was it, Syb? Have they any other children? Who was his wife?"

Sybilla put her hand to her head.

"I know nothing more than the mere fact that Tom sent his child here, and that under a feigned name. It must have been for his own convenience; and he has fetched her away again—I feel sure of that—for the same reason. How often have I told you that, when he wanted

anything of us, he would find us easily enough? You see I was right all along."

"She is such a dear, dear little thing! Our own niece too!"

To see Doris look so happy, to see her evident delight and pleasure in the new idea presented to her, and to notice how she took more and more pleasure and delight in it as it gradually grew more and more familiar to her, awoke a jealous pain in the heart of Sybilla.

"In these past few days, while I have thought so much——"

"Thought of Tom, you mean," Doris interrupted.

"Of Tom, and of all that happened years ago," Sybilla continued,—*"it has struck me that his marriage must have been the secret Lawrence kept from me, and would have confided to me later. But who can Tom have married that he would not bring to the Rectory, that he dare not acknowledge as his wife before us all?"*

"Some one very nice, I'm sure of that,—a good woman; you said yourself Mary's mother must be a good woman," answered Doris.

"Then why have kept the marriage secret?"

"She may have been very poor,—oh, Syb! there may have been a thousand reasons. Don't judge him unheard."

"I judge him by what I have known of him always," she said, sadly; "do you not know I should be as thankful as yourself to find there was nothing to condemn in him?"

"Why he should have made the poor little girl give a false name is what puzzles me," Doris remarked, thoughtfully; "he must have had some reason for it."

"I told you that was *my* fault."

"Yours?" Doris looked puzzled.

"Yes; he doubted my welcome of his child; he judged me as hardly as he has always done."

"Or as you have judged him," said Doris, in a low voice; "we might be so happy now, dear Syb, and Mary might prove to be what we called her fancifully—a real little dove of peace. You will see him now?"

"I suppose so," Sybilla said.

"And be glad to see him?"

"I think I will leave that to you; you will be glad enough for both." Sybilla could not help smiling, Doris was so earnest in her wish that her sister should express some pleasure in this that pleased Doris herself so much. "You have always wished to see Tom, always wanted him, never been content with me alone. You will have your wish now; I am powerless to shield you any longer; Tom has come between us at last."

"He never can do that; no one can do that!" cried Doris, on the brink of tears, and feeling almost desperate that Sybilla should be so distrustful of a dutiful affection that had never failed her yet.

"Here he is," said Sybilla, quietly.

A firm rapid tread was heard approaching the door, and the bell rang with a decided sound, quite unlike,

Doris thought, the mild tinkle it was accustomed to give when pulled by Mrs. Custers, Merton & Coghlan's shop-boy, or even by the one or two quiet friends the sisters had made in this place.

Doris gave a pleased little laugh.

"It sounds exactly like a man," she said. "Syb, I never really wished for the little parlour-maid with cherry ribbons in her cap till now ; I *should* like the door to be opened in style to Tom. And yet it is very pleasant to let him in oneself."

She moved away as she spoke, and for a minute or two Sybilla was left alone ; then they came in together hand in hand.

"Here he is !" cried Doris gaily, but with a tremor in her voice and an anxious look towards her sister, who did not come forward, but remained at the other end of the room. Sybilla felt that Tom should explain his deceit with regard to his little girl, should explain why he had sent her, why he had taken her away again, before she could be cordial to him, or make him welcome in her house. She saw very little difference in him beyond the difference time might have been expected to make, and which she had expected to see. He was older-looking, stouter rather, but the same winning, merry smile was in his eyes and on his lips. Sybilla felt as though the whole past stood between them ; her mother's death-bed, that of her father, her own wrecked life and ruined hopes. Tom must be the first to speak ; she felt powerless to speak herself.

"She is very glad to see you," Doris ventured to say ; "only when Syb is taken by surprise she is not able to express herself directly; she *is* glad to see you, Tom."

"I am afraid not ; I am afraid she never can be glad to see me, dear," Tom answered, stroking the little hand that held his own. "I will take your word for it if you bid me, for you should know her better than I do."

"Who *should* know her so well as I, or know how good and kind she is? She has been so kind to Mary."

"I am sure of it ; I knew she would be when I sent her here ; but, Sybilla, Mary has not won your heart for me, I see, and yet we think her a winning little thing."

"Such a winning little thing ! so dear to us both, and all the dearer for being your child, Tom," said Doris, still looking at Sybilla, in the hope of winning a kind word from her.

"She has not forgiven me," Tom said ; "you, Doris, who have nothing to forgive, can make me welcome,—she cannot."

The word seemed to startle Sybilla now, as it had done long ago when she heard it from the lips of Doris.

"Forgive !" she exclaimed, coming forward at last, and placing her hand in his ; "indeed, Tom, whatever I had to forgive is forgiven long ago. My care for your little girl might have shown you that, if nothing else."

"When you didn't know who she was?" asked Tom, quaintly, and kissing the forehead of Sybilla. How long was it before the little woman betrayed herself?"

He seemed surprised to hear the answer, and how the deceit enjoined upon her had weighed upon Mary's conscience. As Doris narrated the little history, Sybilla grew cold once more.

"It was wrong to send her to us on false pretences, to make her act a part all this time, and knowing us for her aunts to——"

Tom took the words out of Sybilla's mouth.

"She never knew you for her aunts," he exclaimed. "She had no part to act. Beyond being bidden not to mention her own name, and to call herself Mary Smith, she was trained to no deceit. I told her some rubbish of people not liking others to have the same name as themselves: she believed it all, poor little soul!" He threw back his head and laughed; an old trick of his that Sybilla remembered well.

"It was wrong to make her tell a falsehood," she repeated coldly.

Sybilla," said Tom, with a gravity she had never seen in him before, "in all the years that have passed since we two met, do you suppose life has taught me no lessons, or do you perhaps think I have refused to learn them? Do you think the good innocent little child who has been an angel in my home has taught me nothing, and that I am still the same as when you knew me last?"

She did think so, but she made no answer, though Doris spoke her name entreatingly.

"In those days," Tom went on, "you were fond of warning me that we must reap as we sow. Well, I have done so; but, sister, does only evil seed bear any crop at all? Is there no harvest for repentant thoughts, such repentance as you, having no need of, can never know,—no harvest for honest efforts to do right at last,—for prayers offered up, too late, but, I dare hope, sincerely,—for steps taken painfully to regain ground lost earlier? Is there a sure harvest for wrong-doing, and no harvest for all this, Sybilla? or will you forbid me to reap it if there is?"

"How can I forbid you?" she said.

"You can refuse to let me gain a sister's love and pardon,—for I ask your pardon, Syb. You can refuse to let me share with you the affection that has brightened your own life." He looked at Doris with a smile.

"She will choose for her herself," Sybilla said; "she was all you had left me, Tom, and I fancied we might have lived apart, she and I together, and without any question of forgiveness——"

He interrupted her.

"In fact you had shaken me off, and are sorry that fate brings us together again. Well, I have no right to complain, only you are not so merciful as our uncle; he will give you and Doris all the advantages of his wealth, but still he does not shake me off, or disown

me, as you fain would. You see he has been a sinner himself, and may have learnt charity from his own need of it."

"Oh, Tom! we have all need of charity," cried Doris, to whom this sounded like a sneer at Sybilla, and was the first speech of her brother's that had vexed her. Sybilla, on the contrary, felt the full force of it, and was candid enough to recognise the justice of the rebuke.

"We can all be friends," she said! "we will all be friends;" and with more cordiality in her manner than she had yet shown, begged Tom to sit down and make himself at home. "Mary is not like you at all," she said.

"Nor like her mother either," answered Tom. "To tell the truth, I have always considered her like—our mother." His voice dropped at the last words, and Doris stole her hand into his.

"My wife fretted for the child so much," Tom began, "that I called to fetch her home to-day."

"Your wife is an invalid, is she not?" Sybilla asked; "little Mary's account of her seemed to say so. She often wonders how her mother can exist without her."

"Such a handy little creature," said Doris. "I am sure you have both missed her very much."

"Indeed we have. My wife is never very strong, and has taught her little girl to be so helpful that we quite depend upon her. Where is she, by the way?"

Sybilla and Doris looked at one another.

"It was not till she fell ill three years ago, and she such a tiny child then, that I at all realised or understood how much she did, how useful Mary was. Will you fetch her, Doris? I will tell all I still have to tell, and my tale is not told yet, sisters, with Mary on my knee. Where is the child? I thought she would have been the first to meet me, and have been picturing her pleasure to myself all the day long."

Still Sybilla and Doris could only look at one another with a new fear dawning in their eyes.

"I have to tell you of our uncle;—by the way, did you miss the advertisement? perhaps you take no paper, women seem able to do without a newspaper, I've noticed," said Tom, as though mentioning some curious fact that might have escaped Sybilla;—"to tell you also of our marriage, and to answer the question you must have often put to yourself, old Syb, *why* I sent Mary to you in another name than her own. But I really should like to see the child. You make no allowance for the feelings of a doting parent, you pair of serene maiden aunts."

Sybilla could not speak; she signed to Doris.

"You—you fetched her away!" Doris faltered.

"I have come to fetch her now." Tom hardly thought he understood the exclamation.

"Oh, Tom, she is not here!"

"Not here! where is she, then?" He spoke quite quietly. In his own mind he thought Mary might be at Clairville, and was oddly amused to fancy the "crisis"

might be so far developing itself that his sisters had discovered Mary's relationship to Mrs. Bannerman, and had left the little girl there on purpose. "Where is she?" he repeated.

They told him then.

"We made so sure it was you who had taken her away," said Doris, not saying that it was Sybilla who had made sure of it, but joining herself with Sybilla, and ready to share the blame with her of this unfortunate mistake.

"Early this morning, you say?" Tom had stood up and seized his hat.

"Ten o'clock, or thereabouts."

"And making sure she was with me, you took no steps to find her."

Doris mentioned what steps they had taken.

"But you gave no notice to the police?"

Sybilla shook her head.

"My poor little girl!" The misery in his voice half broke the heart of Sybilla.

"Oh, Tom, forgive us! We took all the care of her we could. I would have died rather than let harm come to her. We have learnt to love her so very dearly; but for feeling quite sure you had reclaimed her——"

"Why on earth should you have been sure of that?"

Sybilla was silent. How tell him she had been sure of it only because such a want of consideration would have been just like him, or like her remembrance of him? How tell him that only because the proceeding seemed a

selfish and thoughtless one was she so sure it had been his doing?

"I suppose you did not lose her on purpose," he said, trying to smile. "She is a helpful, capable little woman, and it is unlike her to be lost at all,—not the sort of accident, I mean, that I should have ever feared occurring to her. It is only a pity so much time has been lost. Since ten o'clock, and it is now nearly six!" Once more he exclaimed, "My poor little girl!" with an accent that made Sybilla burst into tears.

"Is it possible that her mother——" Doris was beginning to suggest, but Tom caught at the idea with such avidity, that he cut short her words.

"Not *impossible*," he said. "I will go there at once; she was fretting for her very much. Mary may have seen her by chance and followed her; we live close by." He turned to leave the room.

Doris went with him to the door to say she would herself go to the nearest police-station, and as they lingered there for a moment, a boy came running quickly along the street, a ragged, breathless boy, who never paused until he ran at full speed against Tom at the very door of the Red House, and nearly knocked him down.



CHAPTER XXI.

THE "OTHER ONE" AT LAST.

THE breathless boy having been thrown, by the force of his sudden collision with Tom, against the blank wall of Merton & Coghlan's shop, leant there panting.

"Oh, please, you wasn't to trouble about the little girl; she's all right, and come to, and you can fetch her away soon's you like," he gasped out.

"Come to!" repeated Sybilla's anxious voice; "what has happened?"

"Fetch her from where?" asked Tom with impatience. He had recognized Phil at once; there was no need to waste time in many questions; the boy could be speaking of no one but Mary, whom he had known in the days of Mannington Villas. "Where am I to fetch her from?"

"She didn't know as *you'd* be here; she was looking for you, same as I was myself, and have been for ever so long now; it was the ladies as they sent me to."

"Who sent you?"

"Them at the hospital. I seed it done, seed her knocked down, and I knowed who she was directly; was it likely as I'd *not* know, and me been looking for you this long while, and found you when it's too late, at last?"

"Which hospital did they take her to?" asked Tom; and even at that moment Doris could not help remarking that he did not seem puzzled or perplexed, or find it necessary to put questions as Sybilla would have done, but saw at once the state of the case just as Doris herself did. Indeed, he waited only to hear the name of the hospital and then was gone, long before Sybilla half understood what had happened, or what message Phil had brought.

"I've been after him such a time, and there he's gone again; but it ain't so much matter now," the boy said, as he watched Tom walk up the street, saw him hail a passing cab, and entering it, be driven rapidly away.

Sybilla began to question him anxiously.

"I wasn't looking for him in particular to-day; where would have been the use now? And then I seed him sudden," Phil began, in a confused sort of way.

"My brother, do you mean?" said Sybilla.

"Is he yer brother? Well, it was him I seed, and just hailin' of that 'ere everlasting tram and a gettin' into it. I started off after him, and then I seed a little girl runnin' after him too, and she hadn't no hat nor nothink, and when the tram went on she stood still in the road, and

called out 'Papa!' I shouted to her to get out of the way, 'cause of a cab as was coming along very quick, and she didn't seem to see it coming; the people in the street shouted to her, but she were knocked down, and that 'ere tram drove on and hadn't heard nothin' seemingly; it were a good way on by then."

"Was she much hurt?" asked Doris, trembling.

"Stunned like," answered Phil; "the policeman came, and folks lifted her up, and I said as I knowed who she were, but when I couldn't say where 'twas she come from, —as how *could* I?—they wouldn't none of 'em believe me, and carried her away to the hospital."

"When was that? what time of day?" Doris asked.

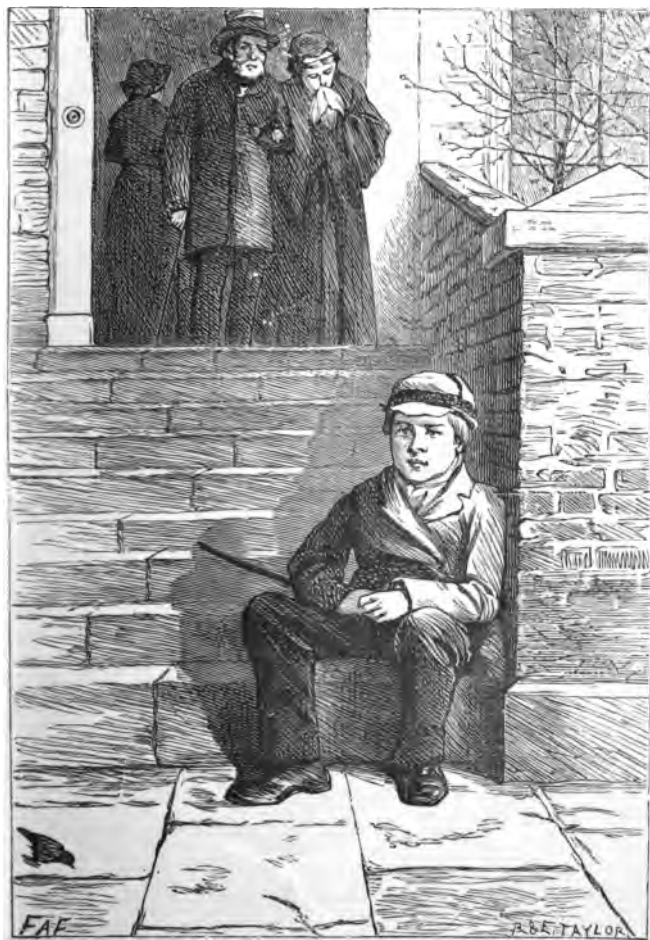
"Going on for ten, or a little later."

"I understand it all, Syb,"—Doris turned to her sister,—"she must have caught sight of her father while she stood on the doorstep when we left this morning, and tried to follow him."

"But that was at ten o'clock, and you come here only now!" Sybilla said to Phil.

"How was I to know where to come to when she was stunned and couldn't speak?" he answered hastily; "and ain't I been sittin' on the steps at that 'ere hospital ever since? and wouldn't I have sat there, knowing she was inside, days and nights too, till she come out, or till the other one come in to seek for her? I wasn't goin' to lose 'em, and me so near finding 'em at last. I wasn't going to lose 'em till I'd had a chance to give it back."

"To give back what?" asked Doris.



" 'Ain't I been sittin' on the steps at that 'ere hospi'al ever since? ' "

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"The child did not come out, nor my brother pass in; how did you come here?" said Sybilla, at the same moment.

Phil laughed; at the very worst of times there was something in the nature of the boy that made him ready to laugh on the smallest provocation, and the provocation seemed certainly small enough to-day, and such as might have roused in many another boy more indignation than amusement.

"They wouldn't believe I knowed her, when I said so first; told me I wasn't respectable, and she were; told me it were all gammon knowing of her name, and *not* knowing where her friends lived, nor nothing. But when it was late, and they was busy through two accidents coming in sudden, and the little lady had come to nicely and give her address, they was glad to find me sittin' on the steps, they was. It were 'My good boy' then, and would I run quick and tell the ladies as the little girl was all right, and they was to fetch her away at once? 'My good boy,' it were, and a sixpence it were, and mighty pleasant-spoken." Phil chuckled as he ceased speaking.

Looking at him more attentively, and her mind being now comparatively at ease about Mary, Sybilla remembered suddenly that this must be the boy she had so often sought.

"I met you once," she said, gently, "and have looked for you since then."

"Lor, have you now? What a many people seem to

be looking for each other up and down ! I ain't forgot you neither ; there isn't so many as speaks kind to me that I should forget 'em when they do. You paid my fare that day, and you give me sixpence too."

"What did you do with it ? and did you get the fourpence for the heavy parcel you were carrying on that day ?"

From long habit, Sybilla remembered so many little trifles that would have escaped others less used to ministering among the poor, and being always on the look-out to help and serve them, and to prove her sympathy with them. The recollection of the parcel did not seem a pleasant one to Phil, however.

"That 'ere stone dog ;" he exclaimed, with a frown ; "it were the beginning of our troubles, Jim's and mine. I never got no fourpence neither."

"How was that ?"

"I took and carried of it careful where I was bid to carry it. A hotel it was, a precious swell one, and a precious long way off. The gent was to let me have a line to tell the other gent as it were come safe to hand, and when I took that back I was to have fourpence."

"And would they not let you have the line you speak of ?" Sybilla gave Doris a meaning glance and shrugged her shoulders ; she thought this another instance of the carelessness of the rich.

"Oh, they give me a line, worse luck, since they give me more too. They give me this here parcel to take back. It were a servant as brought it down ; his master

was off by the train sudden, so he said, and it would be convenient if I took that back to Mr. Blake."

"Mr. Blake! was it he who sent you with the stone dog? Oh, Syb, how near we were, Tom and ourselves! How near we have been all this time to one another, and never knew it till to-day!" cried Doris.

"It were him," answered Phil, nodding his head; "and here's the parcel now; if he's your brother, why I'll leave it with you to-night. The stone dog were heavy, but this here parcel, through carryin' of it on one's mind, has been a precious sight heavier." He placed it in Sybilla's hand as he ceased speaking.

"You did not bring it back before," she said, a little gravely.

"Couldn't," said Phil; "I went and left it with Jim that evening while I got our supper; I hadn't no fourpence, but I *had* the sixpence what you give me. While I was out a spendin' of it, my foot slipped on a bit of orange peel as was on a step of the cellar stairs down which an old lady lives as I deals with regular for herrings and such like. I broke my leg that time, and was in hospital six weeks and more, and bad through insufficient nourishment, the doctors said; and Jim, with no one honest he could send the parcel by, and no address on it if he *had* been able to send, and that ill hisself as he couldn't come to me, and thinking besides as it would do very well to take it home a bit later on."

"What was the matter with Jim? I remember you

told me he was bad," Sybilla said, holding the dirty parcel, for it *was* dirty, in her hand.

"Insufficient nourishment," repeated Phil, with a queer glance; "that's about the name of his complaint, I take it. Very good name that. There's a deal of the same complaint about. I learnt them long words in the hospital, 'insufficient nourishment;' it's a sort of satisfaction to a fellow to know what it is he's dying of, you see."

Sybilla had by this taken off the untidy outside wrapper of the little parcel, and finding it neat and clean within, and Tom's name written on it legibly, and unopened still, held it silently towards Doris, and weighed it in her hand, and repeated, in a voice strangely touched, the words poor Phil had dwelt upon, as though he found some queer pleasure in them: "Insufficient nourishment."

"That's it," said Phil, nodding his head again, and thinking it rather odd the lady should repeat his words; "how many days we would have been thankful for that 'ere fourpence, and how many days I walked up and down looking for the gent as promised it! for you see when I come out of hospital they was moved from Mannington Villas, and no one knowed where they was gone to. Ever since then, off and on, I've been looking for the other one."

"The other one?" repeated Doris, puzzled.

"Along of there being two," explained Phil,—"*two* friends as give me work: him, that one as was here just now, and the conductor of the yellow tram as promised

me work regular, but when I come after it, and that was the first day as I *could* come, he were lost too. Maybe I'll get that fourpence now," with a roguish look, that however gave place almost instantly to one of despondency.

"Yes, you shall have fourpence," said Sybilla quietly, and exchanging another glance with Doris. "How is Jim now?"

"Oh, he's well off enough; I wish I was as well off as Jim is, I do. He's dead."

"Dead! My poor boy! when was that?"

Either because of the pity in her voice, or because of the kind hand laid on his shoulder and drawing him a little nearer to her, or of the true sympathy in the eyes bent upon him, or perhaps because Phil, though nothing but a rough London street boy, had been excited, overworn all day, and was now quite tired out, the question was too much for him, and he burst into tears.

For it was true; Jim was dead.

Moving about the attic in the early morning, the big boy who swore so much had stumbled over the legs of Phil, owing to their being in an unaccustomed position, and had kicked him instantly, at the same time roughly bidding him get up and lie down again straight, for he was taking up ever so much more than his rightful twopence-farthing's worth of flooring. Something in the face Phil raised to his had made this bigger boy pull him to his feet, and then stoop down to look at Jim; having

done which, and retreating as he spoke to the further corner of the room, he muttered that it "wasn't fair." He had agreed, he said, to share the room with living, not with dead boys; and what did Phil mean by never speaking out, but keeping it close all night in that unhandsome way? Pointing with his finger to the motionless form upon the sacks, and swearing still, the big boy called to the others to come and look, which they did with white faces, and stole away afterwards one by one, he himself being the first to leave the room.

Only Phil remained. It was not till the woman of the house, hearing from her young lodgers whom she found huddled up upon the stairs together, what had happened, came up to the attic, and shaking him by the shoulders, bade him make haste and go to the parish officer to give the needful notice of a death having occurred, and a pauper funeral being wanted instantly,—it was not till then that Phil moved at all, or so much as thought of leaving Jim. He got up when the woman spoke to him, and delaying only to take from its hiding-place in the dead boy's jacket the parcel they had kept so honestly for so long a time, and which had always hitherto been left for safe keeping with Jim when Phil was out, went away to do as he was bidden.

The young thieves looked askance at him as he passed down the Court. Open air and fuller daylight had restored their courage. They were in their usual fine spirits now, shouting, and quarrelling with one another before the serious business of the day began. One of them

called out to Phil to join them ; he had nothing to prevent him now, the lad said laughing, for the dead tell no tales. Whereupon Phil, hardly himself as yet, and understanding the remark as a sneer at Jim's honest life, coolly knocked the lad down.

Then followed one of the fights, so common in that place that it attracted no manner of attention, and it was not till it was over, and Phil had got much the worst of it, that he left the Court at last, and ran out into the fresher air of the more open street.

After having rushed past Mrs. Custers and nearly upset herself, besides completely upsetting her dignity, the boy still ran on, not so much with a view of doing his grim errand speedily, as with an unconscious longing to escape the dull misery of the last few hours. Out here in the streets, it did not seem true that Jim was dead. A boy about his age was already at work at the first crossing, a much frequented one, leading as it did to the spot where the tramway line attracted passengers of all sorts. Phil lingered for a moment to watch this boy.

"He could have worked it beautiful, and it wouldn't have tired him neither," he thought, with a dim notion that after all any one who cared for Jim ought to be glad to remember he never would be tired any more.

He went on then, and did his errand, wandering about afterwards in an aimless way, until some hours after, and at a moment when he was not thinking of him at all, Phil caught sight suddenly of that "other one," who had for so long been the object of his search. After that, all

happened as he had described to Sybilla and Doris. His recognition of Mary had been instantaneous as his recognition of her father. During his patient watch upon the steps of the hospital, he was possessed with the idea that having traced Mary as far as this, he could not lose the chance of giving her Jim's message. Jim used to like her so much ; to be so pleased when she noticed them ; to submit dutifully, great tall lad that he was, and with so much greater a knowledge both of good and evil, than his little lecturer, to her pretty words of good advice.

"Keep honest," the child would say, in odd imitation of her mother's words to poor people, and Jim always answered humbly that he would, and all the time might have told her (only he did not think much of it himself) of an unstained honesty in the constant presence of temptation to which her sheltered life was, and probably would be, a stranger.

"Say your prayers regularly, boys ; be sure of that."

Little Mary impressed this duty upon them with much earnestness, knowing as she did from her own experience, that it was hard not to turn into bed at once with prayers unsaid if one was half dropping off to sleep already ; hard too, in the morning, to wait and pray when the day's pleasures lay before one. On such occasions Mary knew it was needful to shut one's eyes resolutely, and force oneself to think what one was about even when saying "Our Father," which really was not a long prayer, and which she was all the more careful to make Phil

repeat correctly, that she herself stumbled a little over the words at times.

And all the time both these boys could have taught her better how to pray, and what prayer was, than she could teach them, only they recognised that fact as little as she did. Sybilla and Doris recognised it, as they listened to Phil's simple narrative.

"Let your light shine before men, that they may see it, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

Honest Phil could not have *said* much about his feelings, or the habit of prayer that had kept both himself and Jim straight; but his light shone.



CHAPTER XXII.

"I NEVER KNOWED WHO HE WERE."

RHIL, in answer to the questions of the sisters, having narrated as well as he was able the story of Jim's death, declared he must hasten home.

"I don't know what they mayn't be doin' to him, or have done to him already, and me so long away," he said, glancing round nervously.

"They can do him no harm now, you know," Doris said, gently.

"I don't know that neither! I must get back. You'll give the gentleman the parcel, and let him know you've paid me for it, so as he ain't no need to remember the fourpence now."

Phil appeared to fancy that Tom's debt to him might have been as great a weight upon the mind of that gentleman as Phil's own unfulfilled commission had been on his. Perhaps it was only natural he should credit Tom with being as honest as himself.

Sybilla could not help smiling as she gave the required promise to explain matters to her brother.

"Where is it you live?" she asked.

"Fish Court : not far off neither, though it's such a different place to this. Places *is* different."

"We are there so often !" exclaimed Doris, "and looking for you there, too."

"There's a many boys about ; 'tain't likely you'd have come across me among 'em all ; a many boys out of work, and poor as we was, Jim and me. And then see how I looked and looked for the gentleman and never found him, and he must have been *somewheres* all the time, you know," said Phil, preparing to depart with that well-earned fourpence which had been transferred at once, for safe keeping, probably, to his mouth.

"Don't you think you ought to have something for your run here?" asked Doris, smiling ; to which Phil replied they had already given him sixpence at the hospital, but if the ladies liked to give him a trifle too, he would be thankful for it. It was work he needed more than anything else, he said, and added, did they think the gentleman would give him work again now Phil had found him at last ?

"I am sure he will ; I can promise you work now," said Doris, with the firmest faith in Tom's kind heart ; "but we are coming home with you, my sister and I ; we want to see where you live."

She hardly needed to look towards Sybilla for confirmation of her words, but Phil objected to them instantly.

"Not coming along of me through the streets!" he exclaimed; "why I ain't fit to walk with ladies! I want to get back quick, too, I do: I want to get back to Jim. I've been too long away already." Again he gave that nervous glance around him, and seemed so anxious to be gone, they let him have his way, and having learnt from him exactly where he lived, prepared to follow.

"He must not be left alone to-night; we must find some other place for him to go to; I suppose the two poor boys lived by themselves," Doris remarked.

"We must get him work," said Sybilla.

"Tom will do that," answered Doris, "and indeed he ought to do it. So honest all this time! Think of it, Syb! And with no idea at all of what heroes Jim and I have been."

"Would they have been heroes, or the heroes that they are, if they *had* had an idea of it?" suggested Sybilla.

"By the way," said Doris, pausing as she and Sybilla were in the act of leaving the Red House,—"*by the way*, where *is* Tom? He never gave us his address at all."

"He is sure to let us know to-night how the child is."

"But,—if he is so thoughtless, Syb?" A smile lurked round the mouth of Doris, but Sybilla answered gravely,

"We may trust him to send us word; I think so at least."

"Then you think better of him than you used? You find him changed? You have had a very little

while in which to judge of him; not more than ten minutes."

Poor Sybilla gave her young sister an imploring look.

"Do not be hard upon me, Doris," she said; "you, who are so quick to see things and to read the hearts of those you love, can you not see that it is myself, not Tom, I sit in judgment on to-day? '*Whatsoever ye sow,*'" she repeated, in a low voice. "If I have fancied for all these years that the seed I sowed was love and care for you, I see now it was love and care for myself alone—to keep for myself the thing I valued most. Selfish from first to last."

"*Don't*, dear!" exclaimed Doris, trying to veil under the half-playful manner the deeper feeling stirred by the words of Sybilla, the strange new sensation that it gave her to hear Sybilla blame herself, where Tom was concerned,—"*don't*, dear! and I object to being called a 'thing.' *You* selfish, Syb!"

"And unforgiving, self-righteous, blind, till now."

"What else?" asked Doris; "it is new to hear you talk so much of yourself at all. The change is sudden."

"Not to me," replied Sybilla; "you forget that I have known for some days what you only learnt for the first time an hour ago. All these days it has weighed upon my heart that Tom—he read me rightly, child—should have been so near us and that we were so far apart; that he, doubting my affection, should have made his child untruthful. The sin that weighed so heavily on her childish conscience was *my* sin, Doris—all owing to me."

"I think you exaggerate now, as you have done all along; and oh, Syb, I foresee that it is I who shall have cause to regret our being friends with Tom,—I, not you."

"I thought you wished for it so much!"

"Not if you are to love him best!" cried Doris, archly. "And, if once you take it into your head that you have wronged him in your thoughts, you *will* love him best; and then think of my feelings!"

"I do not know that I have wronged him in my estimation of him in the past," said Sybilla, thoughtfully; "but I never made allowance for the changes years might bring; and, child, you were right, I never have forgiven Tom till now."

"There was so much to forgive," said Doris, softly, and with a caressing touch upon her sister's arm. Doris was too truthful to imply even that forgiveness should not have come earlier; but the perfect sympathy of her tone and of her simple words was balm to Sybilla.

Sybilla had needed affection so much, had craved for it, and been robbed in turn of the affection of all her nearest and dearest. Tom had come between her lover and herself, had made her mother cold to her, had caused even her father to misunderstand her at times; but the great dread that Tom would come between herself and Doris was disappearing now in the warm sunshine of Doris's loving smile. No protestations could have given Sybilla half the comfort that the very quietness of the manner of Doris had done since she knew the truth.



"The sisters found Mrs. Custers in the poor attic inhabited by the boys."
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"It is strange," she said now, "that the truth should already seem an old instead of a new story to me. It seems perfectly natural that Mary is our niece, and as though we *must* have known it all along. And yet every now and then it all appears a dream, for Tom, and Mary too, have gone, vanished altogether. Let us ask for his address at the shop, Syb? I never thought of that. We might go then and see his wife."

"Better not till he has brought the child home; we should alarm her only," said Sybilla, who had no particular fancy to meet her sister-in-law for the first time with the information that the little girl entrusted to her care had been lost for a whole day. "We can never be thankful enough for Mary's escape! Think what it would have been had the accident been more serious,—what it would have been for poor Tom!"

"Or for ourselves; 'serene maiden aunts' though he called us, we are dearly fond of Mary," answered Doris.

The sisters found Mrs. Custers in the poor attic inhabited by the boys, where the hasty preparations for Jim's funeral were being made.

"And I'd ought to have been here before," the charwoman exclaimed, when Sybilla expressed her pleasure at finding poor Phil in such kind company; "I take blame to myself never to have found out sooner as a sick boy lived up these stairs. I knowed there *was* boys, and there wasn't anyone knowed *more* than that. As long as they pay the rent they may live or die,—they *do* die,—and ne'er a one of us in all the Court be the wiser."

"He ought to go to some other place we think," said Sybilla, glancing round the wretched room, and recognising at a glance by how many it was occupied—the heaps of bedding, or apologies for bedding, here and there, two torn jackets hanging on a nail, another sign or two, told the story to her experienced eyes; "he ought to have another lodging if we can find him one," she said.

"It's found," answered Mrs. Custers, shortly.

"One where his companions will not be——" Sybilla left her sentence unfinished.

"There it is!" said the charwoman. "And he being left alone is the more likely to get into mischief. He's coming to a bit of a place in the house I lodge in, three doors lower down the Court; he can manage the rent of it he says, and it's a better than this, any way."

"We shall see you in regular employment very soon," Doris remarked, cheerfully; "what is it you are fit for, Phil? what is it you would like to do?"

"Anything," Phil replied, comprehensively; "there's errand boys at shops, there's 'osses in the tramway yard and such, there's light porters——" he stopped short at that; remembering the trunk he had lately tried his strength upon, he knew it must be a *very* "light" porter if the work was not to be beyond him.

"I shall grow stronger after a bit," he said; "once, I get enough to eat you'd be surprised to see how strong I'd be. Jim and me was sich as long as we had victuals pretty regular. He fell away so at the last,—I did the

best I could for him always, but he fell away so at the last, Jim did."

"You will miss him very much, we know that; but how good it is to remember he will never want for anything again!" The sweet voice of Doris shook a little, she was so sorry for these boys. "You and your brother when you meet again will have forgotten those hard times, or recall them only to praise God for them and for the love you had for one another. I know you did the best for your brother, Phil, and that should comfort you."

The boy smiled to hear her, but said, after a moment's pause, and looking down upon the quiet, dead face from which he had raised the covering,

"Yes, I always did my best for him. He weren't my brother neither: never had none that I know of."

"Who was he then?"

"I never knowed who he was. We was chums always, Jim and me; played down in the river mud together, such little chaps then. Mother liked to have him in and out; he hadn't got no mother of his own, Jim hadn't. When we was a bit bigger we got work together, sometimes one thing, sometimes another; we shared what we earned, bein' chums you know, him and me, and after mother died we kept on together, and did very well,—oh, very well indeed! you'd be surprised to hear *how* well we did till Jim fell sick, and then in course times was a bit hard, seein' there was only one to work and still two to eat. I couldn't work reg'lar neither: he wanted lookin'

after, he was lonesome and terrible ill off and on. I did my best, indeed I did, but I couldn't never manage for to earn enough to get him the good food he wanted. My going into hospital threw us back dreadful, for when I come out he was that wasted as I'd hardly have knowed him for the same, and me fat and hearty from the good living they give one there!" Phil spoke with unbounded indignation, although since the time he spoke of he had grown anything but fat and hearty. "I tell you I was disgusted at myself, I were! *me* fat, and Jim fell away like that—like *this*; see here!" His voice dropped to a reverent whisper as he tenderly touched the thin dead hand. "No, he weren't my brother, Jim weren't. I never knowed who he were," Phil concluded, replacing the covering over the peaceful features, and turning away sadly.

Sybilla and Doris could only look at one another; speech failed them, nor was speech needed here where actions spoke louder than any words could do.

As for Mrs. Custers, she did not seem so much impressed with the charity that had waited for no claims of kindred to call it forth, as the sisters were; nor did the worthy woman think so much of the honesty that had kept the packet of money sacred through such dire need and want. Perhaps Mrs. Custers saw so many instances of the charity of the poor to the poor, and of their noble friendships, that this of Jim and Phil was no very uncommon case in her experience. As for the money,

"It weren't theirs," she said, simply; "boys is different,

some's honest, and some ain't; that's the way of it, you see. Now Phil was honest always, I'll be bound."

Having made what arrangements were possible for a decent lodging for the boy, and leaving him cheered by the promise of regular employment in the days to come, Sybilla and Doris left Fish Court at last. Phil went with them to the entrance, and stood there till they were out of sight. He moved a little farther down the street after that to a spot from which he could watch the boy at work upon the crossing still, and there leant up against a wall and kept his eye on him, eagerly counting every halfpenny he saw bestowed upon the sweeper, and keeping an account of the total in his head. Anyone watching Phil then, and noticing his occupation, might have imagined he was envious of the lad at work, or in some way or other personally interested in his earnings. It was not so, however, and Phil turned away at last sighing heavily, and saying half aloud, as he had said once before that day,

"He could have worked it beautiful, and it wouldn't have tired him neither!"

Calling at the shop on the way home for the purpose of procuring Tom's address, Sybilla and Doris were a little bewildered at finding that Mr. Bunter could not supply them with it. Their bewilderment, however, was nothing to that of Mr. Bunter himself, and the hopeless state of confusion they all arrived at had the effect of making it appear to Doris more than ever that the whole episode of her brother's visit, and indeed of Mary's long

stay with them, was nothing but some strange dream, that had come to an end at last.

"Your brother's present address, Miss Blake! Now do you know it is to you I should have applied if I had wanted it myself?"

"He was with us this afternoon," Sybilla said, as coolly as though Tom was in the constant habit of looking in at the Red House, and Mr. Bunter knew it, "but left us to fetch home his little girl. We missed her, you remember, Mr. Bunter, earlier in the day, and sent here to ask if she had been seen. You will be glad to hear she is safe, and——"

Mr. Bunter was staring at her in such evident surprise that Sybilla paused.

"His little girl?" he repeated,—“oh, indeed! Another little girl; there appear to be several about.” Mr. Bunter looked round as though he thought one or two were lurking in the shop at that moment.

"We only know of one," said Doris,—“the one who came to us from here.”

"That was Miss Smith—Miss Mary Smith," asserted Mr. Bunter, as if he were glad to feel sure of something. "Mr. Blake left her here himself."

"Did you know his address then,—at that time I mean?" asked Doris.

"I *never* knew it; never *have* known it, ladies, pray be assured of that. What reason have I ever given you to imagine that I knew it? We have been—if you will allow me to say so—good neighbours, ladies; you would not

do me so great an injury as to *imply* that I knew it?" It was a warm evening, Mr. Bunter drew his hand across his brow; he was in very evident trepidation.

"So great an injury as to imply that we know you for a good neighbour, do you mean?" Doris said mischievously.

"That I knew your brother's address,—that I ever knew it," Mr. Bunter answered hastily; and then, much to his apparent relief, a customer came in. Mr. Bunter had no more time, he said, to talk to Miss Blake about her brother; in the interests of Mr. Bunter's principal he had no time to talk any longer to Miss Blake at all. The interests of Merton & Coghlan were paramount at all times with Mr. Bunter, Miss Blake knew that, and might be neighbourly enough to say so if she were ever asked; and Mr. Bunter went behind the counter and devoted himself to business, leaving Doris laughing and rather mystified. The fact being simply that the manager at the time of Tom's marriage had lost his employment through countenancing the young people, and poor Mr. Bunter, fearing a like fate, had always piteously entreated Tom to keep away from the shop, and to keep Mr. Bunter in ignorance of his whereabouts. All which Tom had done. The little man did not even know whether Tom had a child or not, and had been as blindly deceived with regard to Tom's protégée, Mary Smith, as Sybilla herself was. That one visit of Tom's when he left the child had been dreadful to Mr. Bunter, who had lived ever since in a constant state of anxiety for fear it should come to the

ears of Mrs. Bannerman. That the Misses Blake were sisters of his employer's son-in-law he had soon discovered, but argued that Merton & Coghlan must know that as well as he did. It was no affair of his at all events. He had fondly imagined a comfortable *tacit* understanding to exist between himself and his next-door neighbours, and here were the ladies asking open-mouthed, and in the presence of the shop-boy, for Mr. Blake's address!—asserting too that “Mary Smith” was Mrs. Bannerman's own grandchild,—a small Merton & Coghlan as it were! It really was most inconsiderate of the Misses Blake!



CHAPTER XXIII.

ANOTHER VISITOR TO THE RED HOUSE.

“**U****A** RATHER stout gentleman,—grey hair, bushy black eyebrows,—hard to say what his age might be, perhaps an old man, perhaps middle-aged ! There now, Syb ! every creature in the yellow tram has got into the story at last !”

Doris, whose habit it was to walk on quickly before Sybilla and reclaim the key of the Red House from the woman next door, with whom it was left whenever the sisters were out together, had done so that evening, and met Sybilla on the threshold with the above exclamation.

“Everyone on the yellow tram !” Sybilla repeated, staring at the car itself in a puzzled way that made Doris laugh, as it just then passed laden with passengers.

“Not now, not to-day,” Doris said ; “it would take a three-volume novel to contain all those, and ours is a

quiet story of quiet lives, yet there has come into it everyone you met that showery day last March, the day you declared we never had adventures, Syb,—remember that! the day you said there *was* no ‘story,’ remember that, too!”

Doris emphasized her remarks by a significant wave of the great door-key in her hand; then, laughing still, fitted it into the lock, and the sisters entered the house. Doris could not help feeling very happy. It had been a life-long dream of hers that Tom and they two should be friends. Already Doris fancied the cloud was lifting from the sad brows of Sybilla, and that there was more cheerfulness in her smile than ever had been there before.

“Your old fancy, child,” she said,—“making a story of your life! Try and tell me in sober language what new ‘adventure’ we have had to-day; my imagination cannot follow the flights of yours.”

“There is no demand made upon your imagination; you are only called upon to recognize a few simple facts. Is it, or is it not, a fact that you and Mary met that day,—that the man with the blue bag has made our acquaintance since,—that our gentlemanly conductor turned out to be the nephew of Mrs. Bannerman?”—Sybilla was amused to notice that Doris did not say “the cousin of Harold,”—“that even Phil, poor Phil! has been found at last? And now, while we were out, I hear the man with grey hair has called to see us, and finding us both absent left word he would call again to-morrow evening about the same hour.”

"There are a good many men with grey hair," said Sybilla.

"But not with bushy black eyebrows at the same time ! I remember your description perfectly."

"The friend that called this evening must be our uncle," observed Sybilla, looking round her with a sigh, for she found the house strangely silent without Mary, though Mary was always a quiet child.

"The advertisement came to us, instead of our going to the advertisement. Of course it was our uncle, and of course he was in the tram with you, and neither of you knew it. That is just what makes the story ; don't you *see*, Syb ? "

"I see a good deal to-night," answered Sybilla, to whom the mention of her uncle was as the mention of a dead man come to life, so often had she heard her father wonder when and where he died, and say that he surely must be dead or his good heart would have brought him home long before. "I see how right you were in saying people do not meet by chance, but bear some message to each other always ; how even more right still in maintaining, as you so often have maintained, that we cannot separate ourselves from the past, or mould our own destiny, or the destiny of those dearest to us. It is strange," she added, musingly, "how powerless we are to do that, even while it is true that the consequences of our actions follow them so inevitably, that it might almost seem we had in our own hands the fashioning of our lives."

"Oh, Syb, how beautiful it is that both those thoughts

are true!" Doris answered earnestly; "how beautiful that though reaping as we sow, God still overrules our evil, and brings good out of it!"

"So far off as the old life at Courtfield seemed,—so far off as I presumptuously tried to leave it, Doris, and so near as it is to us to-day!" Sybilla said, after a short pause.

"Yes, indeed; Tom living close by, I think he said."

"And Harold Bannerman——"

"Oh, *he* is in Australia," interrupted Doris, colouring. "I am not sure *he* is in the story at all,—on the whole, I am inclined to think *not*."

The necessity for any reply to that last remark was prevented by the arrival of a messenger from Tom, a boy—not Phil this time—bringing a note; and as the postman happened to reach the door of the Red House at the same moment, Doris, who had left the room at the sound of the bell, re-entered it with two epistles in her hand.

"I told you Tom would not leave us in suspense," said Sybilla, with as much quiet confidence in her tone as though that had always been the attitude of her mind towards her brother, and it had been Doris who was apt to be hard upon him and ready to condemn him unheard.

Doris felt some secret amusement at this new phase in Sybilla's character; but the truth was, the mood was not so new as it appeared to Doris. The very first thought

that had struck like a sharp blow upon the heart of Sybilla when she had recognised the photograph in little Mary's locket, was the thought that her hardness had caused Tom to send his child to her under a false name ; that this new fault of his, this new deceit, was the fruit of her own unforgiving temper, and that he had been led into it by her—by her, who was so ready to condemn and judge him always ! It had been a revelation to her. In the long hours of the sleepless night that had followed upon her discovery of who Mary was, Sybilla had blamed herself as well as Tom ; and that had been, in spite of all the jealous fears that still continued to actuate her with regard to him, the first step towards finding excuses for him. It was quite true that, as Doris had said, Sybilla had much to forgive ; it was equally true that the very act of forgiveness seemed to lessen the wrong that had been done, and to leave her, not much, but little of which to accuse her brother in her heart.

Tom's letter—only a hasty line written to set their hearts at ease—told the sisters that Mary was now safely with her mother, and did not appear in any way seriously injured,—at least they hoped not, but could hardly feel quite satisfied about the little girl until a night had passed over her head. The people at the hospital described her as having been so completely stunned and insensible for so many hours, that there was room for anxiety, although she was wonderfully well and like herself already. Tom went on to say he would be at the Red House again on the following

evening, since business would detain him all day. He also mentioned his uncle's intention of calling there, and of providing for his nieces, so that Tom trusted their days of poverty were over for good and all.

"His own, too, I hope," was the comment of Doris, as Sybilla ceased reading.

"I hope so," answered Sybilla, who, although Tom had not during their short interval alluded to the state of his own affairs, had gathered quite enough at different times from Mary to know that the home life she was accustomed to was one of pinching and struggling to make both ends meet.

"There is no address!" exclaimed Doris, taking the letter from her sister's hand; "I told you so, Syb! He has vanished like a dream; Mary has vanished too; unless they come again of their own free-will, *we* can never find them. We can't find *anybody*. We do not so much as know where the man with the grey hair,—well, Uncle Robert if you like it better,—we do not so much as know where he lives, and he might change his mind and never come near us at all. How true what Phil remarked to-day, that there are so many people looking for each other up and down! If it comes to looking for *our* people, Syb, I shall search for them in tramway cars; Mr. Bunter having failed me, there would be no more likely place in which to look for them than the yellow tram."

While Doris rattled on, Sybilla had opened and read the second letter, which proved to be from Mrs. Bannerman, urgently begging for news of Mary, and desiring that



"Mary was relating for the fiftieth time her adventures of the day before."
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she might be brought to Clairville the next day in order that Mrs. Bannerman's own eyes might assure her of the safety of the child.

"She writes exactly as though she had a property in Mary," Doris said.

"She writes, as she so often speaks, exactly as though we were bound to obey her," said Sybilla.

"She is our patroness," observed Doris contentedly, as she brought forward the blotting-book and inkstand that Sybilla might send an answer to Clairville at once. "Tell her we will come to-morrow, though we cannot bring the child ; it will fill the day until the time for Tom and for our uncle to be here in the evening ; besides, the old lady will have many questions to ask. You must prepare to be scolded, by the way."

"I am used to that," said Sybilla, laughing.

Owing to Tom's oversight in having omitted to date his letter, Sybilla and Doris the next morning walked more unconcernedly and deliberately past the stone-mason's yard, with its familiar figure of the stone angel, than they would perhaps have done had they known that behind the lattice panes of the vine-covered house Mary was nestling in her mother's arms. Doris even stopped for a moment to remark how rich the scent of the elder blossom was that morning ; but the occupants of the upper room were too much engrossed with one another to be looking from the window, or aware of who was passing in the street.

Mary was relating for the fiftieth time—and with all a

child's pleasure at having anything to relate—her adventures of the day before. She had been much interested to hear who it was who had seen the accident and taken the message to the Red House.

"Why, how odd that is! we never have seen poor Phil since one day—the very day Miss Blake told me about the lodging—when he was on the tramway car with me." Mary was a person of so much deliberation that *she* found life quite long enough to say tramway car instead of tram.

"He is not a good boy," said her mother; "that must have been the day he stole the money for the stone dog. Did you speak to him then?"

"He shuffled across the car to get out of my way; I thought it was good manners."

"Good manners!" said Tom, who could scarcely take his eyes off his little daughter and was leaning now on the back of the chair on which his wife sat; "it would have been better manners surely to make his bow to you."

"I suppose he thought he was too poor and ragged to seem to know me," said Mary, who really *had* thought so, and, beyond a glance of friendly recognition, had passed the boy without notice, and indeed had thought no more of him. "I told Miss Blake——"

"Aunt Sybilla," corrected Tom.

"I told Aunt Sybilla he used to do messages for you; she asked me about him, but we never could find him. *Did* he steal? I hope not; he and Jim promised to

keep honest always." A look of distress came over the child's face.

"Never mind about Phil now," her mother said; "tell me more about that lady your aunts took you to see so often."

"I don't want to talk any more about *her*. You are so glad to have me back again, mother, that I don't like to think of my old lady now. It makes me wish so dreadfully that she was happy too."

"Perhaps she may be soon," said Tom stroking the child's hair.

"I was away from you so long, and kept thinking, thinking, how mother missed me. You did miss me?"

Her mother bowed her head.

"And that you cried for me in the night; I'm sure you cried sometimes."

Again her mother assented in the same silent way.

"And that your heart ached as mine did, with a pain that was there always, only I forgot it sometimes, but it never went away; there was nothing to make it go away you know, till I saw your face and felt you kiss me. Is that how you felt, too?"

"It is just how I felt."

"I thought so!" cried the child, caressing her mother's cheek with one small hand; "and is the pain all gone now we are together again?"

"All gone," her mother answered smiling.

"So is mine, and that is what makes me so sorry for my old lady. Her pain is there still—always there, she

told me so herself. You remember the picture that I told you of? She said it hurt her when she turned it to the wall——”

“Oh, Mary! she can turn it again, if she will!”

“I don’t think she can,” said Mary seriously; “something seems to prevent her. Do you mean if she *could* turn it, she would forgive her little girl and be happy then? The little girl is grown up, you know,—I find it so hard to remember that; if the picture was turned would everything be all right then, mother, do you think?”

“Everything. You say something prevents her turning it—it is her own hard heart prevents her, Mary.”

Surprised to see her mother burst into tears, the child asked whether it made her unhappy to think of that other mother.

“Of course it makes me unhappy.”

“I will take you to her, and you can tell her so. She made a great mistake once; she said if I did wrong things you would love me no more. I *have* done a wrong thing, because it was not true to tell Aunt Sybilla my name was Mary Smith; only you told me to say so, father.”

She looked troubled and bewildered. Tom did not like to meet the eyes of his little conscience at that moment, so he made her hide them on his shoulder as he threw an arm round wife and child together.

“It was very wrong of me,” he said; “you will have to learn to follow blindly no one’s leading.”

"Not yours? Oh, father!"

"Mine least of all; follow the guidance of your conscience only, darling, for *nothing* can make wrong right."

"That's what Aunt Doris said. When may I take mother to that pretty place where my old lady lives? I told her I should bring you both to see her."

"You told her that?"

"Yes; she said she would be glad to see you. Let us go to-day. I feel quite well again."

The parents looked at one another.

"Why wait longer? If you have the courage and the strength for it, why *not* go to-day?" said Tom.

"You think the crisis is at hand?" his wife said, smiling faintly.

"She has heard of the child's danger,—or rather that she was missing,—my sisters told me that. Being fond of Mary, as Mary tells us is the case, she will be anxious—glad to see her safe again. Her heart will be touched and softened. At what better moment could we venture?"

"She will be delighted to see you," observed Mary; "I told you she said so. Let us go to-day."

"We will. You shall take us, child. If we can do anything to quiet the pain at her heart you spoke of, we ought to do so, if only because of her kindness to you."

"*Can* you do anything?"

"I think so; I feel sure of it and full of hope."

"Shall you—shall you turn the picture?" whispered the child, whose imagination had so long dwelt upon it that she had almost a superstitious dread of the portrait facing the wall.

"Perhaps I may do even that," answered Tom, laughing at the mysterious whisper. "It is certain the picture once turned, years of sorrow would vanish like a dream, exactly as weeks of sorrow have disappeared in the first kiss exchanged between mother and child to-day: certain that a dark past would be forgiven and blotted out, and peace come again."

He was speaking to his wife; but Mary drank in eagerly every word.



CHAPTER XXIV.

IS THIS TO BE THE END?

THE yellow tram again. An unaccustomed mode of transit still to Robert Blake ; the start of the vehicle, after hardly an instant's pause to allow him to mount in safety, sent him staggering against a fellow-passenger.

"Excuse me ! They are in so great a hurry about everything, they give a man no time !"

"Don't mention it ! You see time is a precious commodity nowadays, there is very little to spare."

"There's none ! none to spare at all, no time left, no leisure : it has been hunted out of this old world quite. That is one of the things I complain of, one of the changes that vex me the most,—that and the houses."

"Houses ?"

"There is nothing left to do, I mean,—your gardens are all made, your woods are all cleared, your houses all built ; what *is* there left to do ?"

"To pull them down," said James Fane, laughing; "we are trying that by way of a change all over London now."

His companion turned round upon the seat to face him.

"I've seen you before. Where have we met?"

"We met here, if I remember right."

"In this very car! So we did. I've never been by it since, and here you are again! Do you spend your days in this thing?"

"I might ask the same of you," said James.

"It's odd, though, is it not? a sort of coincidence; there must be something in it, you know, that we should meet always here. We had some talk together that day, you and I."

"I have recalled it with pleasure often," James answered, cordially.

"There was a conductor, too,—a friend of yours, was he not?—a man that quoted Shakespeare to me; a young fellow who fancied he had seen enough of life to judge of it already. Where is he? That's not him standing outside to-day?"

"No; the man you mean is Alfred Bannerman——"

"Is *who*? Bless my soul! I told you there was something in it! Say that again, will you?"

James did say it again, and a word or two more passing between these chance companions led to the mention of Harold also.

"He is coming home for awhile," James said.

"Coming home! What's that for? He had no intention of it when I saw him last."

"You know him, then?"

"Oh, yes; I know him. I begin to think I know every one. I shall find out that *you* are an old acquaintance by-and-by. I'm on my way now to a relation of my friend Harold, a Mrs. Bannerman at,—let me see, at——"

"Clairville," suggested James; "I am bound for the same place; an out-of-the-way place to find, and far from here. I shall be happy to be your guide if you will allow me."

Again the elder man remarked "there was something in it," and said it seemed as though they two had met on purpose and by appointment, and not by chance at all.

"You are a friend of hers?" he asked.

"Her friend, and her man of business."

"Then you are often at this place—what's its absurd name?—this Clairville? You see my nieces there?"

"Your nieces?"

"To be sure. My name is Blake; a scamp of a nephew of mine married the old woman's daughter."

"Then they *are* his sisters?"

"Of course they are his sisters! What impression do they make on you? What do they look like? Pretty and good, I hope? women should be both. Tell me about my brother's children, that I hope to make mine also. Are they tall, short, dark, fair?"

The two men, seated side by side near the open door, might have been alone together for anything any one of their fellow-passengers could overhear of their conversation. James answered, with an amused smile,

"Tall? well, yes; taller than the generality of women,—a slender figure moving with slow grace, though there is so much merriment in chance tones and looks; a little head well set upon the delicately moulded throat; hair, I can hardly tell of what colour it is, but it catches the sunlight always; the truest, clearest, most candid eyes I ever saw,—eyes that make you feel sure, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, that no unworthy subterfuge is ever on the lips, no part being played, *nothing* false throwing a shadow on the life. Pretty? yes, very pretty, and good too, I am quite sure of that."

"What, *both* of them?" exclaimed Robert Blake.

James laughed.

"No, no; I was describing, or trying to describe, the second—the one they call Doris."

"Oh!"

"Not at all!" said James, with emphasis.

The rattle of the tramway car ceased for a moment as a passenger alighted; when it went on again, and the two men resumed their talk, it was once more of Harold that they spoke.

"Do you remember," asked James—"do you remember saying, the day we met one another last, that the path in life on which a man holds out a hand to help another, is a path likely to lead upwards?"

"I have always found it so," said Robert Blake.

"It is the path that Harold treads. His business in England is to look into his cousin Alf's affairs, and take him out with him."

"A Quixotic thing to do! to neglect his own affairs for that!"

"It can hardly be called neglecting them," replied James. "Harold tells me he must have some one with him now, and, recognizing the claims of kindred, would rather have his cousin than cast in his lot with a stranger. It might be, it ought to be, if Alf does not disappoint me very much, a mutual benefit."

"But why come home?" said Robert Blake; "all this could have been arranged by letter."

"I rather suspect he was glad of an excuse to come home for awhile; I half suspect there is some one else besides Alf Bannerman whom Harold hopes to take back with him."

"Not—not this niece of mine? not Doris, of whom you speak?"

"I fancy I should not be far wrong if I were to say yes. There was a look in her eyes and a tone in her voice at the mention of his name, that let me into his secret before a letter I received from him, to-day only, helped to confirm my suspicions," said James, smiling.

"The young fox! the double-dyed hypocrite! The sly, secret, cunning, deep, young fox!" cried Robert Blake, looking as pleased and as content with himself and all the world as though he were heaping terms of praise, instead of implied reproach, upon his friend. "So that was why he made up to the lonely old fellow? That is why no son was ever more attentive to a father than he has been to me these five years past? All because I was her uncle!"

"Did he never mention them?"

"Oh, yes; he mentioned them, as a man speaks of chance acquaintances from time to time. He knows no other than that they are at Courtfield where he left them, and the father living still,—knows no more than I knew when I came home at last to find it too late to make amends for life-long neglect."

It was some minutes before he spoke again, and then it was to ask questions concerning Alfred Bannerman, and how it would be best to serve both the cousins in this scheme of theirs.

"What a world it is!" he exclaimed, when the subject had been discussed between himself and James. "I came home to help my own people, yet wishing to help Harold too, and now it seems in serving one I shall serve the others also—both my nieces and my nephew; for that old lady will come round,—I'll bring her round, you may make sure of that."

"I hope so," answered James, gravely.

"I tell you I will do it! Why, there is time for her to come round! The grave has not closed over either of them; there is time still. I ask you where would be the use of my experience if she does not listen to me, and learn from what I suffered? Her little grandchild is my poor brother's grandchild too; why, what a link that is between us! Of course she'll listen to me, no doubt of that."

"The little girl is her daughter's, then?"

"Who else did you suppose was her mother?" asked

Robert Blake, somewhat testily. "I tell you it has all come about so strangely, so many wandering steps have been guided into the right path, so many separated lives have mingled, and have been linked together, even while fancying themselves far apart, that if—well, if that young Alf who quoted Shakespeare to me once were here he'd quote Shakespeare again, and tell me,—

‘There's a Divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will.’”

"I have always been sorry for people who do not believe in an especial Providence," said James.

"I believe in it! I wonder how those live who doubt it. How they can conceive of a father caring for his family as a whole, but not for each individual in it,—a God guiding His Church aright without guiding each separate member,—a Shepherd laying down His life for the flock, but heedless of the one sheep gone astray into the wilderness—as Tom went, as I went myself?" said Robert Blake, in a moved voice.

"As we all go," answered James; and after that there was silence between them until they left the yellow tram at the old stopping-place beyond the bridge, and walked away westward towards Clairville.

Sybilla and Doris, having started earlier in the day for the same spot, had by this time reached it. The old house looked more desolate than ever; the magnolia, Doris declared, looked more than ever bent upon saving it from the fate which had nearly overtaken it now, for the foun-

dations for new houses were already being dug on either side of Clairville. The dust caused by the workmen, the noise of their tools and of their voices filled the air, the clinging magnolia seemed to quiver with indignation as the blows of pickaxe and spade struck the earth. There was a busy scene of turmoil and labour outside, that made the cool, quiet house within a paradise by contrast.

"Do you remember," said Doris, "that strange presentiment I had the first day we ever saw this place,—the presentiment that something was waiting for us here? I have it again to-day, and so strongly, Syb."

"I hope it is something pleasant," answered Sybilla, as they entered the parlour where the old lady sat alone.

Mrs. Bannerman was so eager in her inquiries after Mary, that what with her impatience of any interruption herself, and her habitual constant interruption of others, it was some time before she arrived at a full understanding of the circumstances, since Sybilla in her note of the day before had mentioned only that the child was safe and with her father, the unexpected sight of whom had tempted her to run out and follow him.

"You have let him carry her off, then?" said the old lady.

"He will not carry her very far," answered Sybilla; "though she may not live with us again, there is a certain sense in which we shall never lose little Mary, now. She belongs to us." Sybilla wondered whether this strange old woman would like the child better or worse for that.

"Who do you think her father turns out to be?" began Doris, gaily; "and Sybilla knew it for days and days! Mary's father——"

"You knew she was your brother's child, and you dare to come here and tell me so?"

Mrs. Bannerman with these words rose from her chair and stood over Sybilla, who looked at her trembling.

"I did not suppose——" she began.

"You did not suppose it would matter to me? You venture to say so, and yet kept the secret? Plots, conspiracies on all sides! But I might have known you were not to be trusted: I might have known those belonging to him 'could be only base as he is himself!"

Sybilla turned an alarmed glance towards Doris; the elder sister wondered the young girl did not resent this attack upon Tom; but Doris, who was standing by the open window, seemed only quietly attentive and interested in what was going on; there was a look in her face that Sybilla found it difficult to interpret.

"It is my sister who might justly blame me for having kept silence," Sybilla said; "I do not see that I owe you an apology for that; and you have shown us such kind interest in Mary, I thought you would be pleased——"

"*Pleased!* Pleased to have been blinded, hoodwinked, deceived all this time!"—her voice trembled with passion that rose higher with every word,—"*pleased!* that the very child herself should be taught to lie to me!"

"That was my fault," answered Sybilla humbly, still wondering her unfailing ally, Doris, did not come to her assistance, though half dreading lest she should do so : "it was because my coldness had so estranged my brother, that he did not dare send his little girl to me in her own name. He might have done so ; but if he misjudged me I deserved it for my harsh judgment of him always. We are at peace now : it is so good to be friends again. The whole past—all of pain and unkindness in it—seems to be blotted out at once when we bring ourselves to forgive."

"You dare say this to me ? You dare come here to tell *me* you and your brother are friends ? What is it to me ? What can it be to me if he teaches this child of his to act a lie because of your hard heart ?"

"You know that it is not because of Syb's hard heart, but because of your own," said Doris, coming forward at last. "Hush, dear !" she laid her hand on her sister's arm ; "do you not see and understand at last ? It was *here*, not to the Red House, that Tom sent his little dove of peace." She turned to the old lady. "Such a dear child ! You love her so much, and love her the more for knowing for whose sake it was she grew dear to you ; or why should Mary have, under your roof, those dreams she spoke of once, and that you told her come to children always at Clairville ? No," with a gesture of entreaty that for once stayed the words on the lips of Mrs. Bannerman,—"*no*, I have never deceived you for an instant, I knew nothing till this moment ; but I do know now,

and *you* know, why poor little Mary found her way straight to your heart."

Fixing her keen grey eyes that had so much trouble in them full upon those clear and truthful eyes of Doris, Mrs. Bannerman answered in a low voice,

"I will believe *you* knew nothing; no one can look in your face, young lady, and suspect you of deceit, but your sister——"

"Why, Syb does not know even now!" It appeared the turn of Doris to interrupt and cut the old lady short to-day; the girl stooped over Sybilla, and kissed her forehead. "It is still a puzzle to you, dear?" she said. "Do you still wonder who Tom married? Why, we were led here to make friends with our sister's mother, so that she, remembering how kind she has been to us, and what good friends we three have been in this dear old house, might begin to be a little kind to poor Tom also."

"You dare venture——" Mrs. Bannerman began; but not quite as she had used the same phrase to Sybilla, nor was she allowed to finish her sentence.

"Oh, yes, I dare!" Doris exclaimed. "I dare ask you, when there *is* only one cure for the pain of all these years, to take it. What Sybilla said just now is true, I am sure it is. The pain of a wrong done, however great, is over when the wrong is once forgiven. When Mary comes——"

"You must not bring her here. I forbid that. Having left the past behind me——"

"We can't do that," Doris interrupted her again; "we tried to do it ourselves,"—Sybilla was touched to find Doris identifying herself thus with her sister,—“and have found out how impossible it is.”

"I find it possible," said Mrs. Bannerman, coldly; "and after this, it will be as well that you do not come here again, neither you nor your brother's child." Her voice betrayed no emotion; but she left the room hastily as she spoke.

Doris looked sadly at Sybilla, who whispered,

"Is that to be the end of it?"

"Of course it is not the end," Doris answered, but her eyes were full of tears.

Sybilla collected her own drawing materials, laid in order the prints and sketches with which she had been occupied, and arranged the portfolios for the last time. Doris had stepped out into the garden while Sybilla was thus engaged, and her sister presently joined her.

"Are we to go without seeing her again?" Sybilla said.

"I don't know; I feel dismissed. Merton & Coghlan have done with us," answered Doris, with a sigh.

They lingered a few minutes, however; for the ideas of Sybilla were still rather confused, Doris must enter into explanations.

"I could have told you a week ago if you had let me know about Mary then," she said.



"Sybilla arranged her portfolio for the last time."



CHAPTER XXV.

THE CRISIS.

IT had grown suddenly dark in the garden, nearly as dark as in the wainscoted sitting-room which was in twilight at all times. The sun had disappeared behind a cloud, or, as is frequently the case, some slight change of wind had summoned the city smoke to hang its thick pall over the west end, and simulate in summer the fog of a winter's day,—simulate it in appearance only, for the atmosphere was close and oppressive, the flowers drooped fainting in the heat, the stone of the sun-dial by which Doris stood was warm to the touch.

“I suppose we ought to go,” Sybilla said, looking round her sadly. She was perplexed and unhappy. It seemed such a new confirmation of her fears, of that assertion she had once made, that Tom was destined to bring sorrow upon everyone, that the desolation of this home also had been owing to him.

“Do you remember my saying I thought it the saddest

story I had ever heard?" she continued; "how little I thought then that it was Tom's fault!"

"Not his alone," said Doris quickly; "and I remember your saying on the same day that there was no wrong too great to be forgiven."

"How dark it has grown," Sybilla observed; "if you, Doris, are susceptible to the influence of places, I think I must be to that of the weather, for this dim, weird light affects me strangely."

As Sybilla ceased speaking, both sisters were startled by the sound of a heavy fall within the house. They looked at each other in alarm.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Doris, answering to the silent ear she read on the countenance of Sybilla; "she could not make so much noise as that: it was a piece of furniture that fell. The sound came from the sitting-room. "Why, Syb, how you tremble! We will go together and see what has happened."

Doris moved towards the glass doors into the parlour as she spoke; but neither she nor Sybilla went further. The sight they saw within the room stayed their steps; they stood outside, silent spectators of the scene within.

Mary was there, kneeling on the floor; an overturned chair lay beside her, a heavy footstool had rolled on to the crimson rug, the special property of the Persian cat, who stood with arched back and swollen tail, in evident disapprobation of the uproar in her usually quiet domain. There was quite enough to account for the noise that had so startled Sybilla, enough without the fallen picture



"Mury was kneeling on the floor."

over which Mary was crouching in dismay. The glass was broken, the frame had started from the force with which it had come in contact with the polished oak boards skirting the room, the cord, rotten with age doubtless, had snapped in two; the child had one end of it in her hand; at the moment they first caught sight of her she was alone.

"Mary!"

Doris hushed the exclamation of Sybilla.

"Be quiet," she whispered; "be surprised at nothing in this house, Syb dear; wait and see."

The eyes of Doris shone with a happy light, she was smiling. Sybilla, without exactly understanding what there was to call forth the expression of pleasure she saw on her sister's face, felt her own spirits raised in sympathy, and was now as willing to wait and watch as Doris herself, and almost as hopeful as Doris, for the child was no longer alone. The noise of the fall probably had brought Mrs. Bannerman to the spot.

"I am so sorry," said Mary, one little hand detaining her grandmother by the dress. "See what I have done."

"What *you* have done? How was that?"

"I was not tall enough, you know: I stood on the chair, and *then* I couldn't reach, so I put the stool on that, and just as I touched the picture, the stool slipped, we all fell down together, for the cord broke, and the picture is broken. I am so sorry! I can't tell you *how* sorry. Won't you forgive me?"

"You might have been badly hurt yourself. I told you little girls should not be curious; it was very naughty."

"It was not from curiosity." Mary rose from the floor, and stood trying to control the tears that *would* come. "I wanted to make you happy, I did indeed."

"To make me happy?"

Her grandmother was not looking at her, was looking only at the portrait, a chalk drawing, lying face upwards now upon the floor.

"You said you could not turn it yourself."

"Give it me." The old lady held out her hand.

The started frame and shattered glass that poor little Mary deplored so much, were nothing to her grandmother.

"The drawing is not hurt," she said; "but you have been very naughty."

"I know; but it did not seem naughty. I came in, and you were not here——"

"Who let you in?" Though she spoke to the child she never looked at her, but looked at the picture still.

"Eliza let me in, and was so glad to see me, and said you would be glad too, and she wanted to go and tell you, but I asked her not, because I thought it would be a surprise if I went in first and—and turned the picture," faltered Mary.

"What put that into your head? Go on; tell me the truth, if you can."

"I tell it always; except once, only once. You said the pain was there, in your heart always, and father said when the picture was turned the pain would be gone, and so it came into my head all at once, and then it grew

dark, and I was frightened, and so I fell, and it's broken. *Won't* you forgive me?"

"I did not forgive *her*," still never turning her eyes from the chalk drawing in her hand, never so much as looking at the little, eager, pleading face raised to her own.

"Because she was grown up? Is that why you did not forgive her? I am not grown up. Aunt Doris—oh! you don't know about it, but they *are* my aunts—Aunt Doris says *everyone* is ready to forgive a child. When your little girl was a child, then you forgave her, didn't you? Won't you try and think I am her—when she was little like me, you know?—and then you'd leave off being angry with me, for I am so sorry."

Mrs. Bannerman said nothing to that, and when Mary spoke again it was in a hushed, awed voice.

"*Hasn't* it made you happy to see it? Father must have made a mistake; you are—crying. Or is it because I broke it? Mother will be so sorry; she *was* sorry, so sorry, that she cried when I told her about you. She came with me here; she and father went on a little way and were to come back soon, and I was to ask if they might come in. I think it is ceremonious of them," said Mary, who was recovering herself gradually, "because you know you said I might bring them to see you; but they are too polite to come in until you ask them, though of course they want to thank you for being kind to me."

Mrs. Bannerman still not speaking, still gazing only at the drawing unseen for so many years, Mary ventured to put her arms round her, and throwing back

the little head with its tumbled curls, to look up into her face.

"Stoop down, kiss me, and forgive me, do," she said. "I don't think you are dreadfully angry; there's a look in your eyes as if you were going to smile soon. Ah! but it's the picture you are smiling at, it's the picture you are kissing, not me. Haven't you forgiven me yet? It *wasn't* curiosity indeed, and indeed I am not a curious person; I only thought I'd try and make you happy. Look at me. Don't look at the picture, don't kiss that, kiss me."

"I'm an old fool," said Mrs. Bannerman. "Go and fetch your mother, child."

Doris pulled Sybilla gently away. Out of sight of the window they stood together in the garden, where the weeds had not yet, at all events, been allowed to grow, and though neither sister spoke, each knew the other was offering a silent thanksgiving. The thought crossed the mind of Sybilla that in all probability she would not now be required to make those other two sketches Mrs. Bannerman had once spoken of.

When they went into the parlour by-and-by, Tom and his wife were both there; "the crisis" had come, and, as is generally the way with a domestic crisis, had been less dramatic than might have been expected. Mrs. Bannerman was scolding everyone for the risk Mary had run the day before; Tom was laughing.

"To let her go out into the streets like that, and then this fall to-day, after having been knocked down and

nearly killed yesterday,—pretty care to take of a child !” Mrs. Bannerman looked angrily at Sybilla.

“The fall to-day was no fault of Syb’s; don’t let her be scolded, Tom,” said Doris.

“Yes, but it was her fault, and yours too, Miss Doris, and yours,” with a nod to Tom, thus including him in her sweeping censure; “*yours*, of course; putting all this stuff and nonsense about a picture into the child’s head ! And none of you had the sense to see the little thing was actually superstitious about it. And she fancying the house haunted, and all the rest of it. What could be worse for a child ?”

While she spoke, the old lady was stroking her daughter’s hand, patting her on the shoulder, smoothing her hair, apparently unable to prevent touching her every instant.

“What’s a picture ?” she said, in her abrupt way,—“who cares for one? it is not like you either now, my dear. We will have another done, and one of the child, too,—oh yes, and of your husband, if you choose. Miss Blake shall do them all.”

“I don’t take portraits,” said Sybilla, laughing.

When Robert Blake arrived an hour later, he was half disappointed that there was no reconciliation to make; it was made already. The room was full of people; there was so much on all sides to tell and hear, so many plans to make, so many voices raised in happy speech, that none of them heard the door bell, and were taken by surprise when Eliza appeared.

"Please, ma'am, it's Mr. Fane," she said ; but he have brought a gentleman with him."

"Well?" said her mistress coolly ; "what does the girl stand staring there for? Don't you know your place, and what you have to do when gentlemen call?"

"To shut the door : leastwise, unless it's from the shop, and then to come and ask if leave was give particular, and to mind and keep the chain up till you've bid me let 'em in," answered Eliza promptly, bringing a blush to the cheek of her mistress, and making it very difficult for Tom to keep his countenance.

"When gentlemen call, show them in," said Mrs. Bannerman severely ; "if you don't know your place, and the duties of a parlourmaid, Eliza, I must look out for another young woman who does."

With the arrival of Robert Blake and James Fane, came renewed talking, discussion of plans, making of arrangements generally. A great deal of all that passed must be left to the imagination of the reader. For instance, how Doris coloured and smiled at hearing her uncle's praises of Harold ; how, on hearing further that he was expected home, she blushed still more, and lost herself in a day dream, from which she seemed to find it hard to wake when spoken to. How Sybilla's face lost its sad chastened look altogether for a time, and wore one so happy and content, that when Robert Blake remarked to James, "Why, man, what did you mean? *both* my nieces *are* pretty," James quite agreed with him, and, indeed, wondered that he had not himself been

more struck with the attractions of Sybilla when he saw her first. How Robert Blake, though fully intending all the time to keep up the severe attitude of a judge towards his nephew, found himself promising help of all kinds to Tom, so that, as Alf Bannerman would certainly have remarked had he been present, Merton & Coghlan were going begging still, for no one seemed to stand in need of that flourishing concern. How only little Mary sat apart with a somewhat ruffled and indignant air. Noticing the child, and begging kindly to be allowed to share her perplexity whatever it might be, James had for answer that she was "tangled in her mind."

"Aunts are bad enough when you are told of them suddenly," said Mary; "but grandmothers are *too* confusing! I do not think it was right to cheat me so. Did you know *your* grandmother, Mr. Fane? or did you once think she was an old lady only?"

"I believe I always thought her an old lady."

"I am not joking," said Miss Mary, with an air that recalled to him his dignified fellow-passenger in the yellow tram; "there is nothing to joke about that I can see. I feel puzzled all over."

Finding himself a minute or two later standing apart with Doris, for they had all wandered into the garden, James drew her attention to Sybilla.

"How happy your sister looks," he said; "and when I saw her first——"

"In the tram," Doris put in, laughing.

"Yes, in the tram, I was struck by the deep sad-

ness of her countenance ; it seemed her habitual expression."

"It was," answered Doris thoughtfully, "and it may be again ; but is it any wonder she should look happy now? Some people live in the lives of others, and Sybilla is one of those. Only a few days ago she thought she had no one in all the world but me : now there is my brother, dear little Mary, whom we love so well already, our uncle, to say nothing of a new sister."

"The more the merrier, then, you think."

"Oh, yes ! If only because Sybilla loved me so well, and said so often that having me she needed nothing more to make her content, I know *how* content she will be with many more to love."

"I wonder what you will all do," said James.

"Does it matter what we do? We shall never quarrel any more. I don't think I care to look forward just yet. See how the city smoke hangs in the air and hides like a curtain everything except just this pleasant spot we stand in all together. I don't want to look further ; the present is enough for me just now."

That might be all very well for Doris, James thought, with an involuntary sigh of regret for the castle in the air his old friend had kindly built for him to inhabit. Tom and his uncle were talking earnestly together, and appealing every now and then to Sybilla ; Mary, hanging on the hand of her mother, tried to drag her hither and thither in the garden, where it vexed the child that nothing was new.

"My schemes are all disappointed," she said, as her mother, touching the warm stone of the sundial, told her she had known it before Mary had been born; "I wanted to show you things. And I suppose in the house it will be just the same; you will know that too. And oh!" standing still suddenly, and opening her eyes very wide, "if that is my grandmother, why, mother, you are the little girl she never would forgive! It was your picture——"

"That you knocked down and destroyed," Mrs. Bannerman broke in, in her old fashion; "and a mischievous trick it was."

"Father was right, however," whispered Mary to her aunt Sybilla; "he *said* when the picture was turned—that meant when its face could be seen, you know—everyone would be happy. I don't think I am going to be very happy though."

"Why not? what is this new fancy, darling?"

"Now that mother has a mother of her own,—and that is *so* surprising, what do grown-up people want with mothers?—she will not need me so much; and if we are to be well off, that will be worse still, for I can't even do things for her then. Poverty is *much* the happiest state of life, don't you think so, Aunt Syb?" said little Mary with a sigh.

"Neither poverty nor riches matter the least bit in the world, when people love each other, as we all do," answered Sybilla.



CHAPTER XXVI.

THE STORY ENDS.

“**P**HILIP DAY.”

“Eh? Who’s that?”

Phil really hardly knew his own name: it took a moment or two of recollection before he understood it was himself this stout gentleman with the bronzed face and bushy eyebrows was asking for.

“Why, that’s me!” Phil said at last. “I ain’t used to hearin’ of it all at once, but it’s me, sure enough.”

Robert Blake stood in the doorway of one of the worst houses in Fish Court, presenting just then—and, for that matter, presenting always—a choice specimen of the problem that had so much exercised his mind since his return to the old country.

“Do you suppose pauperism treads everywhere on the heels of civilisation?” he said; “there’s poverty enough where I come from, but—but not *this*,” he *could* only be

vague, for what name could be given to all the nameless evils round him ?

Phil, wondering what the gentleman meant, wondering too whether he expected an answer, looked up at him more attentively, and in so doing caught sight of the person to whom that last remark of his had really been addressed. The person was no other than Alf Bannerman.

"It seems as though every one can be found when no one's looking for 'em," said Phil.

"We were looking for you at all events ; I promised you work."

"And I come after it—when it weren't to be had. It's been a reg'lar game of hide-and-seek, what with you, and what with the other one."

"The other one ! That is what brings me here," said Robert Blake. "The ladies with whom you left the parcel have given it to the rightful owner, and he bids me tell you——"

"Tell me this 'ere first—is the little girl all right?" Phil interrupted, earnestly.

"Quite right ; none the worse at all."

"It were a rum start, for to go seeking 'em high and low, and then to see her knocked down sudden in the street ! I'd like to see her again—just once."

"Not once only ; many times, I hope, in happy days to come."

"There's a message as I'd like to give her," Phil said, turning his head away—"a message from a poor boy as

she were good to, and as liked her very well, she was that pretty-spoken to him always."

"You will have many opportunities of giving such a message," answered Robert Blake, who had learned from the sisters all the story of the stone dog, and the unselfish friendship between Jim and Phil; "would you like to live with them, my lad?"

"As how?" Phil's eyes brightened at the thought.

"They are going away, far away, across the seas. If you care to go too, they will take you with them gladly. To find you and to tell you this was my errand here to-day."

"I'd go anywheres along of 'em," Phil cried, "and I'd do anything they put me to, and Jim would have said the same. They'd have made it easy for him, for they was very kind, and Jim wasn't never very strong,—least-ways I've been thinking as what Mrs. Custers says is true, and he couldn't have been very strong at any time, or he never would have fell away so at the last. I'd rather think it: it seems to make it come easier to me that he should be took and I left. If it weren't too late he'd have been glad to go,—we was together always, Jim and me,—he'd have been glad to go across the sea, I'm sure of that."

"He is better off where he is, you know," Alf said.

Phil answered that he did know it, and took comfort in remembering it, but that he missed him very much.

"What will they put me to?" he asked, after a moment's silence; "something as I can do I hope,—not

But what I'd learn to do 'most anything for them, and be proud to do it. If it was waitin' at table, answerin' of a door, cleanin' of knives, and such, why Jim would have been the one to do it better nor me. Still, I'll try my best. But if it were 'osses now?" Phil threw out the suggestion in such an insinuating way that Alfred laughed.

"It may be horses, I believe, if you choose to have it so," he said, glancing at his older companion: "they would find him a sharp lad, and useful at anything he took a fancy to."

"Honest and trustworthy into the bargain," added Robert Blake. "You may look upon the matter as decided, Philip Day, so no more *pros* and *cons*."

What *pros* and *cons* might be Phil did not know, but who so pleased and proud as he at being bidden to present himself at Clairville without delay? Who so eager and full of curiosity about the new country in which his future was to lie? Who so grateful to his friends, so forgetful of past trials, and so mindful all the time of Jim, and sorrowful to think he was no longer here to share such happy fortunes?

"It seems too strange to be true, don't it?" the lad said to Mrs. Custers when he was taking leaving of her, before turning his back upon Fish Court for good and all,—"'most too *good* to be true, for me to get a start such as this 'ere? It's no matter how hungry and bothered a chap have been when it's once over, I see that. If only Jim could go along with me, for it's a better country than this, the country what I'm going to."

"Jim has gone to a better country before ever you have," answered Mrs. Custers, than whom no one who knew him was better pleased at Phil's good luck; "and it don't matter to him neither all the trouble that went before: it matters to none of us when life's over, like a tale as is told."

"Like a tale that is told" seemed also to Sybilla the doubts and jealous fears, the cares for Doris, and the sorrows of her own life, as, with all bitterness gone, she stood watching the ship that bore to a new world Tom, his wife and child, and Mrs. Bannerman—Merton and Coghlan no longer, for the business was disposed of, and the money thus realized thrown into the common stock.

"As well now as at my death," the old lady had said; "at the other end of the world what will Merton and Coghlan signify to me? It belongs to the old place, and the old life, and we are beginning a new life together, Polly, you and I."

It had been decided that Tom should take charge of his uncle's property in Australia, and that Alfred Bannerman should go with them; for Harold the interest of Robert Blake had procured a land agency at home in England.

The scheme for her parents' future had the immense advantage of Mary's approval; that is to say, when once it had been made clear to her that in a colonial life there would be every opportunity for her continuing to be, as heretofore, a most necessary and important member of the household. But to Sybilla, when first decided upon,

it had brought a degree of pain that no one fully understood but Doris.

"There is a rough kind of justice in it," Tom said, with rather a rueful smile; "I neglected you always, Syb; I did worse," with a sorrowful glance at his father's grave, by which the three were standing together for the first time. "And now, when I should like nothing better than for us all to keep together in the old country, I am to be banished from it, and from you. One comfort is that you can no longer fear my coming between Doris and yourself, or doing any harm to Doris now."

"It is *no* comfort to Syb to have you far away," said Doris quickly; "it is the only drop of bitter in her cup."

Tom had had much to hear of his father's last few years, and had listened gravely to all Sybilla told him.

"It hardly seems right that all should be forgiven, and a bright future lie before me and mine," he said at last. "There are moments when I tremble, as Polly does, lest some judgment is to overtake us."

"Oh, Tom!"—the soft eyes of Doris filled with tears,—"*is that* the 'forgiveness of sins' that we believe in? a half-hearted pardon that keeps vengeance in reserve? Dare we think so? May we not rather take the full comfort of the blessed peace the sense of pardon brings with it? It is as your little Mary says—the very moment of forgiveness takes all the pain away, blots out the sin."

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village shop, and feast her schoolmates on unlimited bulls' eyes and whole pounds of sugar-stick.

It was characteristic of Sybilla that amongst the many plans made at this time she made none for herself ; and characteristic of Doris that she saw no necessity for any such plans on the part of Sybilla, since Doris took it for granted that they would still share one home.

Harold would have welcomed his wife's sister cordially, but Sybilla shook her head ; she was too wise to make a third in the household of the young couple.

"I do not like to leave the Red House," she said, when the subject was mentioned at last, not by either of the sisters themselves, but by their uncle.

"Then don't leave it," he answered ; "keep a home there for me. I don't promise not to run over to the other side of the world now and then ; but we must have a home somewhere, you and I, and why not together, niece ? I seem to have lost my place in the old world, it is too civilized for me. 'You will do very well when once you get into the groove again,' my friends say. Now that's just what I don't want ! I don't like grooves ! If you and I, being well off, and able to live where we please, live quietly in the Red House, and do our best to lessen some of the evils round us, *that* won't be a 'groove' I take it, or if it is, there are mighty few people moving along it ; we shall have it to ourselves, and room to breathe freely," with the odd gesture habitual to him of throwing out his arms as though he had not space enough to breathe freely where he was.

Thus it came about that Sybilla lived on in the Red House in the Suburbs, and that it continued to be her life-work to minister to the poor. If gentler charities at home claimed in days to come the loving care of Doris, her heart was none the narrower for that, but opened widely as it had ever done to the cares of others also, and if the hands she stretched out were still happy hands, they were for that reason only the more eagerly outstretched to help wherever help was needed. The one sister seemed to stand in sunshine still, while the path of the other lay in the shadow of a past grief; but in the gentle sadness of Sybilla there was no longer any bitterness, and both sisters alike dedicated happy days to heaven.

There is little outward change in the Red House, though the door *is* opened now by a parlour maid with cherry ribbons in her cap; less change still in the shop, for the name of Bunter is written very small, and that of the 'late' Merton & Coghlan in letters as large as ever; the yellow tram pursues its noisy way up and down the long, straight road, and carries with it people who, as Doris says, all have stories of their own; but the story of those it carried the day on which this tale opened is told at last.





